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VOL. 1047.

LOVE THE AVENGER.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LOVE THE AVENGER

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "ALL FOR CRYSTAL"

CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOLUME II

LEIPZIG

REINHARDT TAUCHNITZ

1863

Printed by the University of Leipzig

LOVE THE AVENGER.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "ALL FOR GREED."

[*Mary P. R. Blaylock Perry*]

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1869.

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LOVE THE AVENGER.

CHAPTER I.

The Postmaster of Malleray.

"THOSE aristocrats and clericals have it all their own way, as usual. I always knew it would be so, and so I told Théophile when the *coup d'état* took place, only he wouldn't believe it."

This speech was made by old Mardonnet, the postmaster at Malleray, in the afternoon of the very day when the Mont-Vivienne circular was lodged in the hands of the printing-office director. The latter was a chum of old Mardonnet's, had been so for more than a quarter of a century, and but a few months ago had owed a great service to the postmaster, obtained through his active intercession with the Minister of——, who, as we remember, was cousin to Mardonnet's deceased wife.

The old postmaster had breakfasted at the printing-office that morning, and knew all about the new circular from Mont-Vivienne, and the old one from Beauvoisin, and was in his own mind thoroughly convinced that the electoral contest for Savre-et-Merle would be waged between the two great landed pro-

prietors of the district, and that it did not much matter which of the two won.

"Except, indeed," as he remarked, "that the Duc de Vivienne was too priest-ridden and might be for restoring tithes."

Old Mardonnet was, upon the occasion in question, seated in his bureau, sorting the letters and newspapers, and other parcels that had just come in not a quarter of an hour ago. The one bag, not a very big one either, lay on a stool beside him, and he, seated on another, extracted missive after missive and placed them in their proper order and place on a huge table before him. An elderly woman sat in a chair by the window, sewing—it was his sister-in-law, a widow, who had lived with him for the last ten years, and, like her defunct sister, enjoyed the honour of being first cousin to a minister. It was horribly stuffy in that bureau, for it was a habit of old Mardonnet's to keep the window shut while he sorted his bag. Why he did so nobody knew, but he would do it, and, as I said, the place was awfully hot and stuffy.

"Yes," he resumed, harking back to his first words; "those great people have it more than ever their own way. I told Théophile so, but he would have it just the contrary, and now he sees pretty well what it comes to!"

"Who knows," rejoined the elderly seamstress, (by name Madame Héloïse Picard); "who knows whether he sees it or not? people don't always see what is there to be seen, but what they think they

see. Théophile had always wrong notions about everything."

"Well," retorted the postmaster, "he was cock-sure of becoming our deputy the moment Carpentier should, in any way, be removed; he can hardly fancy he has any chance now! (Two, three, five, six—six letters for Beauvoisin,)" he muttered, parenthetically; "he can hardly fancy he's got a chance, I should think; there's Carpentier removed for ever by death, yet, who ever thought for a moment of Théophile; he counted on his friend Daudel, the sub-prefect, (such a ne'er-do-weel,) and he counted on your grand cousin up yonder."

"On Lolo!" exclaimed Madame Picard (it was a custom among his near relations irreverently to call the great man thus, his name being Louis). "On Lolo, forsooth! as if he ever did anything for anybody but himself!" and she shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, never mind," went on the postmaster. "Théophile persisted in believing in him, too, and now he sees how it all is. No sooner did Carpentier have that fit of his than (my belief is) the prefect settled everything with that Monseigneur at Belespoir, and no sooner was the breath out of Carpentier's body than Madame la Marquise comes down on all our heads! And there they are now, both of them; they think nobody knows anything about their quarrels, but everybody knows all about it—it's Punch's secret! Beauvoisin against Vivienne; a fight inside the same camp, the old story over again! There are four letters

for Clavreuil, and a *Revue des Deux Mondes* for Breuvières, and there's a *Moniteur* for you, Héloïse," and he jerked the paper towards his sister-in-law, upon whose skirts it fell.

She had seemingly not much interest in it, for she let it lie where it had dropped.

"And the very instant it was seen who were likely to be the candidates, what did the sub-prefect here do? why, get out of the way! He used to be mighty civil to me, and was constantly coming in to have a chat, (so condescending!) but after Carpentier's death he was sent for by the prefect, and whenever I've met him since then he's skulked away and avoided seeing me, and the moment the Vivienne candidature came to be talked about seriously, off he went, Heaven knows where! a good friend, truly! Mr. Marius Daudel! a tower of strength! a fine protector! as Théophile thought him! just a blusterer made of India-rubber!—well! I never saw a Red Republican who was not so. . . Pah! I hate the whole lot of them."

"I don't believe they're half as bad as Republicans turned lacqueys," retorted Madame Picard; "like Lolo," she added, sneeringly; "a bully to those who look up, and a boot-blacker to those who look down upon 'em. Like *Lolo!*" she added, for the second time, and with apparently considerable satisfaction.

"Bless my soul! what's this?" ejaculated all at once old Mardonnet: "Here's a letter from Théophile," and he adjusted his spectacles, opened the envelope, and read.

The missive was a short one, three or four lines only; but the wrinkled face of the old postmaster reddened with pleasure as he scanned them. "Well, to be sure, this is news!" he cried out. "He's got the cross, Héloïse, fancy that!"

"Who has?"

"Why, Théophile, to be sure!" replied old Mardonnet.

"The cross!" echoed Madame Picard, "and for what, I should like to know?"

"That he doesn't say," answered her brother-in-law, looking puzzled; "but here is what he does say:—

"MY DEAR FATHER,

"I am happy to tell you that I have had the honour of receiving the decoration the day before yesterday, owing to the intervention of our cousin, the minister. I send the *Moniteur*, containing the announcement thereof to my aunt, and am your

"Very devoted son,

"THEOPHILE MARDONNET."

"There's his letter," said the postmaster when he had read that epistle, "and Héloïse, there's the *Moniteur* on your gown."

Madame Picard stooped now, and picked up the paper; opened it, and glanced down its columns.

"It's in the official part," observed Mardonnet; "if you can't find it, give it me."

"Here it is," said she, and she read the statement of how his Majesty the Emperor had been pleased, on the proposal of the Minister of——, to decorate M. Théophile Mardonnet, Manager (he was only cashier) of the International Franco-Italo-Daco-Roumanian Commercial and Agricultural Bank of Roumania, at Bucharest.

"That is to prevent him for ever asking for anything else," remarked Madame Picard. "They give him the cross because they either can't or won't make a deputy of him."

"Very likely," responded old Mardonnet; "but it's very pretty of Lolo, all the same! very nice, indeed!—is that all?" he added, turning to his sister-in-law, as though he half expected his son to have been decorated several times over; "is there nothing else in the paper?—nothing of any interest?"

"Nothing of any interest to us," replied Madame Picard: "there's a long account of a reception at the Tuileries, of the King of Mesopotamia, and a report on the Chassepot rifles, and three columns on Egyptian mummies, and then promotions in the army and navy."

"Nobody we know anything of?"

"Not a soul; and then here, there's an account of the funeral of the Bishop of Pontoise, and the nomination of the Bishop of St. Germain, as coadjutor to the Archbishop of Chantilly."

"Ah! no interest whatever in all that," muttered the old postmaster, as he turned once more to his work of sorting the contents of his bag.

CHAPTER II.

Ten to One on the Red.

THERE was an alteration in Claire's manner towards her husband since the day when he had supported her and held his own ground against the curé de Belespoir. It was so slight, that, to most people, it would have been imperceptible; but Olivier felt it, and it was pleasant (in his homely phraseology he would probably have said comfortable,) to him to be in his wife's company, nay, even to be alone with her.

This was something altogether new, for, from the very time of their marriage and journey to Italy, though the best possible understanding seemed to exist between them, and though the youthful Marquise had apparently no will save that of her lord, it was evident that their accordance rested on no deeper foundation than that of good education and good manners. Since their return to Paris, this state of things had in no degree improved, but just the reverse. M. de Beauvoisin, as we know, had little or nothing in common with his wife, and their daily employments brought them together only in public, where they manifested towards each other the same invariable politeness. The even tenor of their domestic serenity was the result of good breeding—nothing beyond.

"They know how to live," used to say the Marquis de Moranges; "and that is the one only indispensable science," he was wont to add.

Till the day on which the curé of Belespoir paid his eventful visit to the château, Olivier had continued to be more or less embarrassed by his wife's presence, and to avoid being with her unless summoned by other persons. Let no one fancy that this resulted from his entanglement with Claudine; it had absolutely no connection with it. He knew that, as far as the Sphinx was concerned, he was, as he had practically described it, "in for it," and this was agreeable enough so long as the Sphinx and he were together; but, once separated from the object of what, by ordinary spectators, would have been termed his passion, he thought no more of her.

I repeat it, Claire embarrassed him—made him uneasy; and, spite of her undeviating gentleness, impressed upon him a terrible sense of inferiority. He did not like this—no man does—and, as I say again, he avoided his wife's presence.

This it was which was altered.

First and foremost, Claire's beauty had suddenly struck him without overawing or freezing him. It was a genial impression which her whole being made upon him when she stood up and took his part, associated him with her, called him her husband, did not disdain to proclaim herself one with him. It was new, and it was delightful, and he could not help hailing the occurrence with boyish glee.

Claire, on her side, was more kindly disposed towards the man who had so openly and so unhesitatingly made common cause with her—and that, not in the face of the curé alone, but in the face also of the redoubtable Marquise mother. She was touched by the ready adhesion she had met with; there was something simple and unsophisticated about the obedience so warmly tendered, and Claire's generous nature could not do otherwise than overpay in gratitude any service accepted.

She was more than courteous—she was familiar with her husband all the rest of the day; and the next morning allowed him to drive her over to Clavreuil in the pony-basket. The Dowager could not make it out, but her instinct warned her that her supremacy was threatened.

Olivier felt at home with his wife, for they had something to talk of which interested both. Claire's interest in her husband's election was a lively one, for she was resolved to bring up her son to play an active part in the affairs of his country; and the first indispensable step towards this, in her opinion, was the entrance of the father into the arena of public life.

Claire loved France ardently, and loved the traditions of the past, not narrowly, but because, to her mind, the past was full of the chivalrous, disinterested glories of her race and of her land. Claire was no politician, but, like every true French gentlewoman, loved dearly whatever related to politics in the abstract,

and was, instinctively, at her ease in all the combinations of *la grande politique*.

Olivier had no such impulses or aims as hers, but he entered into the excitement of the impending contest in a sportsman-like kind of way, and, besides, he thought it fitting that he, as the head of the Beauvoisin family, should represent the department.

They had, therefore, at last, a subject in common, this ill-mated man and wife, and they seemed likely to make something of it in the end, and talked of it freely and earnestly, and had opinions and exchanged them.

The day but one after old Mardonnet had received the news of his son's decoration, Claire proposed to her husband to walk across the park to Malleray, and see what letters the rural postman brought, for they were sure to meet him on the way.

It was a splendid day, with a burning sun, but with a breeze also, and their road lay through shady woods, and Claire had all the pedestrian capacities of her countrywomen. She walked along with queenly steps under the leafy boughs, playing with rather than using her parasol, for a broad straw hat protected her head and face. On they went, discoursing of the coming contest, and Olivier thinking within himself that he had never seen any woman half so beautiful as Claire.

At a turning in the wood they heard the sound of a horse's hoofs at no great distance.

"We're close to the cross-road that leads from Beauvoisin to Clavreuil," said Olivier.

The sound of the horse's hoofs ceased, and then were heard closer, but with a deadened sound.

"How abominably ill one is served!" exclaimed the Marquis; "that's some one riding inside our woods—making a thoroughfare of Beauvoisin—the fellow's got on the turfy paths, yet, God knows, I've keepers enough! only they do nothing."

The sounds were distinct now, and came nearer every instant.

"There is the intruder," observed Claire, pointing with her parasol at a horseman picking his way through the trees towards the very path down along which they were walking.

"Well, upon my life, that's cool!" ejaculated angrily M. de Beauvoisin; "I'll tell him at once that——"

"Hallo, old fellow! is that you? well met!"

"How delightful! it's Monsieur Dupont!"

These were the two exclamations which burst simultaneously from the young Marquise and from Henri Dupont, for, sure enough, it was he.

"Well," said he, with a smile; "I meant to surprise you, and it is you who surprise me, starting suddenly out of the depths of a wood like goblins in a fairy tale," and, jumping from his horse, he slung the rein over one arm, and with the other linked himself to Olivier.

As they turned back, and walked on together now, in the direction of the château, Henry Dupont could not help surveying the pair before him with a secret

astonishment. He was fairly puzzled. What had happened during his absence? There was not only good intelligence between Olivier and Claire, there was a cheerful familiarity that told of pleasant intercourse, of home-habits; Henri couldn't make it out. Was it possible that, to use M. de Beauvoisin's own phrase, he and his wife were beginning to get on together?

"Where have you come from?" asked Claire's sweet ringing voice.

"From Paris, direct," was the reply.

"What's that nag?" said Olivier, looking at the big-boned animal that came slouching behind, dragged by the rein upon Count Dupont's arm.

"That's the war-steed, or winner of the Derby, or anything else you choose, to mine host of the Black Eagle; he keeps it for his own private use, but I persuaded him to lend it me, promising to be most careful of the precious beast."

"When did you arrive?" questioned Olivier.

"Two hours ago; I took the night train to Chartres, got there at midnight; came on to Malleray in the diligence, in the rotonde, think of that! pounded my bones for five hours, got to Malleray, with what was left of me, ravenous; breakfasted, obtained this jewel of a mount that you behold, and rode on here to surprise you—in which design I have signally failed."

"I'm not so sure of that," observed Claire, laughing.

"What had you to do in Paris all of a sudden?" asked Olivier.

"What had I to do?" echoed Henri,— "Why, your business, my friend, and I've done it?"

"Done what?" cried both Olivier and Claire together.

Count Dupont came to a full stop, and, with intense satisfaction sparkling in his eyes, "I've worsted the church!" replied he; "I've stopped the Vivienne candidature."

"Henri!" exclaimed the Marquis.

"Oh! do tell us how," petitioned Claire, eagerly.

"Well, it was easy enough," resumed Dupont; "you know, or don't know, that I, too, have alliances amongst the Philistines. I, as you do know, have kept aloof from them, and they are (for that reason) always making advances to me, so I simply dropped down amongst them, and urged with might and main the nomination of the Bishop of St. Germain as coadjutor of Chantilly. You don't clearly understand me yet, I see, but I'll explain by-and-by. In those parts the government wants me terribly, on account of their difficulties with the general council touching the great line of railroad they are projecting; I had only one visit to make to the Minister of——, and all was done; the old archbishop was persuaded that he had always longed for his colleague of St. Germain, so, now he's got him, had everybody's content! They bothered me to go and see the Emperor, but I didn't think it necessary to go that length. Is any circular out from Mont-Vivienne?"

"None."

"And none will ever appear now," chuckled Henri.

"What, you suppose then," said the young Marquise, "that the curé of Belespoir was the sole mover of everything there?"

"I'm certain of it," replied Henri; "you leave the Mont-Vivienne people to me. I'll drive over there before dinner this very day, and I'll answer for it they will coalesce with us now. The Duke, when he's left to himself, is the most upright and sensible of men."

"Then, in reality, now," remarked Claire, "Olivier has no opponent, and comes in quite naturally."

"Of that I am not so sure," replied Henri. "On the contrary, I fancy there is a government candidate somewhere, but who it is I don't yet know, and I didn't wait for the knowledge, because I thought my presence more useful here. But I have an old friend in the Home Office, and he will telegraph to me down here, either to-day or to-morrow, if the government does fix on anyone. Meanwhile have your circular out, old fellow, as fast as possible."

"But we can't get it," answered both Olivier and Claire.

Count Dupont de Laporte started two hours later for Mont-Vivienne, and didn't return that night.

The next morning he was at Beauvoisin for breakfast. Both the Marquis and his wife were on the stone steps leading into the grand entrance when they heard from afar the wheels of the dog-cart approaching.

"All settled there!" cried joyfully Henri Dupont, as he sprang down from the vehicle and held out his hands to his host and hostess. "The Duke and Gaston,

and everybody behaved admirably, and we all join together, all the decent people of the county, to back you. By the Lord! but you never did see such a face as the curé of Belespoir made (for I began with him) when I showed him the official announcement of the coadjutors-ship in the *Moniteur*! However, he soon righted himself, and came over to Mont-Vivienne in the evening, and held forth eloquently about the awful unreliability of the Government, and the sinfulness of any division in the Conservative party on account of the temporal power of the Pope, and so now we're all united like one man!"

"There's a telegram for you," said Claire, handing an envelope to Count Dupont, "it came this morning at daybreak."

Henri tore it open, but when he had read it:

"Impossible!" he exclaimed, "It can't be—no, that would be too strong!" and he indulged in a fit of genuine, irrepressible laughter.

Olivier and Claire looked inquiringly at him, and when his hilarity was somewhat calmed,—

"My dear fellow," he said, "it is really too great a piece of fun; who do you think is their candidate? You'll never guess, you can't guess—I defy you."

"Then tell!" exclaimed Claire, impatiently.

"Why, Mardonnet!"

"What, the old postmaster?" asked the Marquise.

"No! his worshipful son!"

"You don't mean the man who was a downright

Red, a Journalist, and of whom all sorts of stories are told?" added Claire.

"Yes, I do; him! him, himself and no other! The bosom friend of the sub-prefect of Malleray."

"Oh! how glad I am!" cried Claire, clapping her hands for joy; "it is so delightful not to have to oppose one of one's own kind; so delightful to have to fight against abominable, worthless creatures of that sort!"

"Yes, I confess this promises real sport," retorted Henri; "we'll bring this boar to bay, old boy, and get no end of fun out of him!" and he slapped Olivier heartily on the back.

Olivier spoke no word, which passed unnoticed, and Olivier turned exceedingly pale, which passed unnoticed also.

CHAPTER III.

The New Candidate.

WHEN the scheme invented by the curé of Belespoir was ripe, M. Daudel, the ruler of Malleray acted, and determined to outwit his priestly adversary. He simply went straight up to Paris, represented, in certain very high quarters, where he knew such news would be attended to,—that clerical intrigues of the most dangerous species were likely to organise a system of religious reaction in the department; that the prefect (poor, dear, excellent man,) was taken in, and that, if the government did not do something, there was no saying what might not happen. He was listened to, and it was decided to start an official candidate in Savre-et-Merle. But who? well, just no one in particular; it so happening that, at that identical juncture, those exalted, or busy in office, had no definite candidate to propose. It was a very hot summer; everybody was absent; the Home Minister was at the sea-side, and the Minister of—— had consented, for the time, to take his place. This was the very man the sub-prefect wanted; the cousin of Théophile Mardonnet's mother. He whom Théophile Mardonnet's aunt called Lolo, and spoke of disparagingly.

The matter was promptly settled; the sub-prefect secured for himself a supporter in the future represen-

tative of Savre-et-Merle, and the Minister of——added another to the group of deputies upon whom he could count in the Legislative Chamber, and who, on all occasions, where he was personally attacked, would vote for him like one man. Everybody was satisfied, and most of all, Théophile Mardonnet, whose dreams of political greatness seemed now on the eve of being fulfilled.

His friend the sub-prefect returned to Malleray the moment he had secured in Paris the object for which he went thither. Mardonnet agreed to follow him on the next day; and on this, the eve of his first entrance on so important and so new a career, he sought aid and counsel of his Egeria, Mlle. de Mourjonville. As the Marquis de Moranges was at Brunoy, and Claudine more in the dependency of our friend Aspasia than ever, the latter could dispose of her time pretty freely, and she accordingly disposed of the evening in question in favour of the future legislator. Mardonnet offered her a dinner à Brébants, which she accepted, but a few hours later this pair might be seen together in a small room on the fifth story of a house in the Rue Poissonnière, which Mardonnet dignified with the name of his study. Both were standing, and Mlle. de Mourjonville seemed preparing to take her departure; an open box was between them on a large table, with a secret drawer in it wide open also. Aspasia held in one hand a paper; it looked like the envelope of a letter. They had apparently been engaged in a somewhat animated dispute, for whilst Mlle. de Mourjonville looked mali-

ciously satisfied (there was a curious mixture of bitterness in her contentment), Mardonnet wore all the marks of having suffered a defeat which humiliated and disturbed him. As he laid his fat hand on the open box,—

“Wouldn’t it be better there?” said he, deprecatingly.

A sneer of ineffable contempt played over Aspasia’s thin lips.

“It’s because it can be no good save in my keeping, that it will never get back there again,” she replied, pointing to the box; “so now play your cards well, make no concessions, come to no compromises, and therewith good-bye, for it’s getting late, Camille will be coming home, and I will have no scenes of conjugal jealousy with my adorable sister.”

She held the paper in her hand tighter than ever, and thrust that hand into the pocket hole of her dress, holding out the fingers of the other to Mardonnet. He kissed them, shook his head, and accompanied his visitor to the door.

“I have always said it, Aspasia,” he remarked, in an almost rueful tone; “you could make me do anything you liked! anything—and I don’t half like what you’ve made me do to-night.”

“I know you don’t,” was the rejoinder, “but then, pray, why didn’t you put it out of my power to do it? why didn’t you destroy the trace long ago?”

“Well! one don’t know,” murmured Théophile, “one never quite——”

“One!” echoed mischievously Aspasia; “nonsense about one! all men now-a-days are like that; you’re all

of you absolutely good for nothing, and yet not bad—only weaker than babies; no! no! my excellent Théophile, you are not to be trusted, whether to do wrong or right, but now I hold the position, and you can't go far wrong, so good-bye, and try and make a good thing of the deputation.—Good Lord, what geese these men all are!" she added, as she tripped down the stairs.

Early the next morning Théophile Mardonnet started for the fortunate department which was to enjoy the honour of possessing him as its representative.

Mlle. de Mourjonville was right when she told Théophile Mardonnet he was not to be trusted. He was the most unreliable of human beings, and not one bit more to be relied upon by his accomplices in wrong than by those who might perchance coalesce with him to do right. He was low-minded, flat-souled, a vulgar believer in baseness, but at the same time what his countrymen term a *bon enfant*, for which there is no equivalent in any other tongue ("good fellow" won't do, and is wanting in the sense of total irresponsibility implied by the French phrase).

It is a great mistake to infer one defect from another, and it was precisely one of the chief causes of the blunders so often committed by princes, ministers, and other men in power, in times when they had recourse to vile instruments to work out vile ends, and thought that unlimited corruption was sufficient to insure the applicability of a man to all the designs of

perversity. Corruption weakens, distends, softens, and there is no more resemblance between a merely corrupt and a perverse nature than there is between mud and stone. Mud is dirty, but won't answer the purpose of flint.

Now, Théophile Mardonnet's was eminently a muddy mind, swampy, unclean, but unsteady above all. He loved all coarse pleasures in their coarsest shape, and, as I said, when I first introduced him to the reader, he was persuaded everyone else did so too. But these very pleasures had, by a long continuance, unnerved and unfitted him for the accomplishment of any stern purpose. He had impulses, as we have seen, and under the influence of a sensation, would commit an act of utter foolishness. When on his return from Barbaria, as he styled the Moldo-Wallachian provinces, he had caught sight of M. de Beauvoisin in the street on Easter Sunday, he obeyed one of these absurd impulses, and was moved to accost Olivier by recollections of days gone by, in which foul enjoyments had brought them together—days in which he, Mardonnet, had lost his head for Camille Leblond, and thought that lovely syren cheap at any price.

Of such men no consistent criminal was ever made, and this our friend Aspasia had not to learn. She knew that you may stick fast in these fat, flabby natures, and be wonderfully embarrassed to get rid of them, but that as to stiffening or hardening them, or making it safe to trust to them, this is beyond the science or skill of any magician.

When Théophile Mardonnet arrived at Malleray he was charmed with the notion of becoming a deputy, and believed that the fact of having a contest before him—a contest with the two leading families of the department—inspired him with genuine delight. But this was a piece of the purest self-delusion. At the bottom of his heart Monsieur Théophile loved only easy achievements, and was persuaded that, thanks to the rivalry between the Beauvoisins and Vivienues, he, as the acknowledged official condidate, should be elected without any trouble or over-exertion. There was no thirst for sport in the man's nature, not the slightest love of fun, and it needed but a few hours for the sub-prefect to find this out. Marius Daudel was of the lean kine, sharp, keen, and eager, and worth ten of Mardonnet's species, and at the very outset he suspected his friend would turn out a failure. But he was not of a nature to be so promptly foiled, and he resolved to carry his candidate through, whether the latter helped him or not. Marius Daudel was not disposed to stick at trifles; he knew his colleague at Combeville would go all lengths in a campaign against Royalists and Jesuits, as he styled them, and therefore, relying on his own energy, and prepared to have recourse to the most unscrupulous devices, Marius Daudel regarded the election for Savre-et-Merle as thoroughly secure.

Two days after his return from Paris, the sub-prefect boldly made his appearance at Beauvoisin and expressed himself well-pleased with Olivier's circular

(which had been suffered to come forth, and had been placarded in the streets of Malleray the day before), but he added that he sincerely regretted to be incapable now of doing anything save oppose all independent candidates, seeing that the government had determined upon bringing forward a special champion of their own, to whose support he, as the head functionary of the *arrondissement*, was, of course, committed. He hoped the Dowager and her son would take into consideration his official position, and ascribe only to its necessities any acts of seeming hostility to which he might, in spite of himself, be obliged; and when he took his leave it was with a certain air of cordiality, especially with Count Dupont de Laporte, who made him feel extremely uncomfortable, and from whose good-natured off-hand familiarity he could not make himself free.

On leaving Beauvoisin he repaired to Mont-Vivienne, where he was politely received as usual, but where he obtained the confirmation of what he had till now refused to credit: namely, that the so recently rival candidatures had merged into a single one, and that the Vivienne party would strain every nerve to secure the nomination of the Marquis de Beauvoisin. For this Marius Daudel was not prepared, and it rather disconcerted him. He had heard on reaching Malleray on his return from Paris that the Duke had retired, but he fancied that it might be possible to neutralise his opposition to Mardonnet, by his rancour against the neighbour who had but so lately been in the field

against himself. To find the Vivienne and Beauvoisin factions united, and pulling heartily together, was a disappointment, and the sub-prefect could not quite conceal that he felt it to be one. It puzzled him too, to explain; he did not clearly see what could have brought it about. Why was the wily curé of Belespoir, who had been all for the Duke, now so energetically all for the Marquis? It was perplexing and exceedingly vexatious.

"It will divide the department, Monsieur le Duc," said incautiously the sub-prefect.

"I am sure we ought to feel proud of such an admission from you," rejoined courteously the curé of Belespoir, who was present, "for it shows us that in your esteem the forces of the two parties are well matched, and that we who have nothing to offer, save the devotion to what we call the right, can have an equal chance with the nominees and functionaries of the great imperial government."

"You will count no votes in the towns," retorted snappishly the sub-prefect.

"We shall see," responded mildly the curé, "the rural populations may——"

"Oh! there, I beg your pardon," interrupted Marius Daudel, growing angry under the biting perfidy of the churchman's eye and smile, "there you have no chance whatever—the peasant is devoted to the imperial dynasty body and soul!"

"But God forbid that we should harbour a thought against the imperial dynasty!" exclaimed the curé;

"we also are devoted to it. Since when, my dear M. Daudel, is the fact of a deputy's aspiring to independence of opinion to be set down as identical with hostility to the glorious family now sitting on the throne?"

"I'm sure I don't know!" ejaculated Daudel, growing savage and striving to conceal it; "but I know it is a great pity to divide departments in this way—and only just see; here is an official candidate, and what does he find? Why, all the large landed proprietors in a league against him: you, Monsieur le Duc and the Marquis de Beauvoisin, and the Comte de Clavreuil, all——"

"You forget Count Dupont," observed provokingly the curé, "a great proprietor, but a confirmed Liberal—an advanced one—not of what is termed our set——"

Marius Daudel was enraged.

"Well!" he retorted. "Say everybody—all the possessors of the soil! You really must not be surprised if the imperial government, which is sprung from the people and reigns for the people, sees in such leagues as these the determined opposition of a caste, of a clique, to the interests and desires of the many—you must not be surprised if we retaliate, if we have recourse to all means in the way of resistance. You drive the government, you drive us, its agents, to extreme measures."

"I trust we shall know how to combat them, sir," said the Duc de Vivienne, with dignity.

He had scarcely spoken hitherto, leaving the curé to repel the functionary's attacks.

"It is not our wont to fly from danger, and as you are good enough to think that our forces are so nearly matched, why, we will loyally try to carry off the victory, and hope that the government will not condescend to resort to such means as honest gentlemen must always remain in ignorance of."

The sub-prefect left Mont-Vivienne dissatisfied, and as he passed before the post-office at Malleray to reach the sub-prefecture, who should he see mounting his horse at the old postmaster's door but Count Dupont, who bowed to him in a most disagreeably patronising way.

While Marius Daudel had been making his reconnaissance at Mont-Vivienne, Henri Dupont had gone straight at the head-quarters of the enemy himself. He had made a descent on the old postmaster, and sat an hour with him and with Madame Héloïse Picard, talking freely and pleasantly of the coming contest, and pitying old Mardonnet for the share of odium he would come in for later, and wondering at the simplicity with which his son had allowed himself to be caught in the government trap.

This told on both sides. Old Mardonnet, firm-seated in his conviction that whatever was, was for the sole benefit of aristocrats and clericals, and the other great of the earth, came easily over to the idea of his son being a madman for dreaming of an electoral contest in the conditions Count Dupont described; and

Madame Picard set M. Théophile down as a fool for not perceiving that the government (and above all, Lolo, as she termed the minister of ——) were taking him in.

Henri Dupont rode away laughing to himself over the impression he had produced at the post-office, and made the young Marquise share his hilarity when he recounted to her the scene.

Monsieur Théophile disliked exceedingly the aspect of affairs as described to him in the most discouraging manner by his relatives, and when he sought comfort from his friend the sub-prefect, he only got reproached for his lack of pluck.

It was evident that the independent faction was in the ascendant, and things looked brilliantly for Olivier.

As the late post went out (the Paris bag was called for at ten at Malleray, and often, when there were few letters, only made up after supper),—

“There’s Théophile’s handwriting,” remarked Madame Picard, looking at the letters lying on the table before old Mardonnet; “addressed to a woman too: I wonder who she may be?”

The postmaster took the letter up:—

“Mademoiselle de Mourjonville, 300, Rue de Grenelle,” mumbled he, reading the address, “ah! well, he’s always the same, always after women!”

Madame Héloïse turned up her nose with an absolute jerk, sniffing powerfully.

“I thought,” she said with disgust, “that when

men went and married such creatures as that woman," (this was her way of alluding to Madame Théophile née Camille Leblond), "they kept to them."

"Perhaps generally," opined old Mardonnet, "but Théophile is incorrigible—a very Don Juan! Women will be the ruin of him."

"Pah!" cried Madame Héloïse, as though vindicating the superiority of her entire sex with one word, "such nasty coarse tastes as men have!"

CHAPTER IV.

Below the Mark.

THE election was fixed for the 14th of July, and the 5th had come and passed.

I wish my reader to remark this date, for on the 5th of July, amongst the letters which were delivered to the Marquis de Beauvoisin after breakfast, there was one which arrested his attention in no ordinary degree. He said nothing, but, lighting a cigar, sauntered forth and smoked under the shade of the trees on the lawn. If anything really did disturb him no one noticed it.

Olivier rode out that day alone, and did not return to the château for dinner. But when dinner was over, a stable boy from the Black Eagle at Malleray brought back the Marquis's horse, and also with it a slip of paper addressed to the Dowager, on which the Marquis had written in pencil that a telegram just received obliged him to go up to Paris on business, but that he should be at home again in thirty-six hours. He desired that the dog-cart might be sent to Malleray on the next day but one, early in the morning, so as to meet him at his descent from the Chartres diligence, which, as we know, corresponded with the Paris-Chartres night-train.

This was a very odd proceeding on Olivier's part.

The Dowager was so used to managing her son's affairs that she was at a loss to conceive how he could have any business of which she should not be better informed than himself. The young Marquise was annoyed, and thought that her husband made a mistake in absenting himself even for a day, at a time when his presence was so indispensable; and Henri Dupont was fairly bothered (I cannot find another word for his peculiar feeling on the occasion) because, in spite of himself, he believed in neither the business nor the telegram.

However, at the appointed time on the following day but one, that is on the 7th of July, early in the morning, the dog-cart was sent to Malleray and duly brought back the Marquis de Beauvoisin, who, as he had said, had returned from Paris by the Chartres night-train.

He had been as good as his word, and had only stayed away thirty-six hours, yet there was something constrained in his manner on his return home, and in the manners of those who met him there.

His father-in-law had come over from Clavreuil to report progress as to what was doing in Combeville, and Madame de Clavreuil this time accompanied him. From all sides good news came in. Monsieur Tarbet, the notary, sparkled all over with joy, and maintained, against the sceptical doctor, that the populations in France, the masses, as they are now denominated, were in a far more healthy frame of mind than was generally believed, and perfectly disposed to rally

round the old traditional families the instant the latter showed a real interest in public affairs. Dr. Robichon himself was forced to admit that Olivier's chances were vastly better than he had at first supposed possible; but he persisted in it that everything was owing to Count Dupont. "It is his influence does it all," growled the Æsculapian democrat; "his grandfather was a Jacobin, his father an Orleanist, and he is a Republican (if he's anything at all!)."

Tallard, the Marquis de Moranges' factotum at Brunoy, drove over perpetually with wonderful accounts of the state of things in that part of the province. The Marquis was absent and would only return in a few days, but he had written to the Duc de Vivienne, a letter which had absolutely electrified that entire clan, and the sub-prefect of Brunoy (an honest man as we have said, but feeble and totally unfit for his post) had admitted to the Tax-collector (who had repeated it to his wife) that it was quite impossible to make any way against the united forces of all the great proprietors leagued together.

And there, in fact, lay the whole secret; for once there was union, real and perfect union, and against the government too!

The curé of Belespoir and his uncle, the bishop, were pulling together heartily with old Robichon and his democrats; and while the Mont Vivienne faction was stirring up the peasant forces that inevitably support immense territorial wealth judiciously employed,

the *tiers-état* of the towns rallied to a man round Henri Dupont de Laporte.

The prefect was beginning to feel so uncomfortable in his new position that he had already conferred with his secretary-general (who had never liked Marius Daudel) upon the necessity of sending up a report to Paris to say what a mistake the sub-prefect of Malleray had made, and how probable it was that the government would be reduced to suffer a great defeat in Sâvre-et-Merle. The Corsican at Combeville was left untouched in this document, not even alluded to; it was safer to censure the Parisian, and so, paving-stones of blame (cart-loads of them) were being got ready wherewith to crush the meddling intriguer, the Bohemian penny-a-liner (the secretary-general styled him thus when he had confidential chats with his prefect) at Malleray.

Marius Daudel himself began not to feel thoroughly at his ease, for he was quite aware that his only hopes rested upon complete success. He aspired to govern the whole Department, but he did not require to be told that he himself would be the first victim if, instead of securing the nomination of a thorough-going Imperialist deputy he should prove to have only set the country by the ears, and united together against the government all the various forces of the opposition. He had not counted on the Vivienues and the clericals giving unanimous support to the Beauvoisin party, and bold as he was, and "capable of everything," he was perplexed. Then, too, he got no encouragement

whatever from his own pet. Old Mardonnet was for ever urging the madness of attempting to make head against the great people, as he called them, the landlords and the clergy; while Madame Héloïse Picard giggled, viciously derisive, over the ridiculous idea of having trusted to a minister, and that minister your own cousin, too.

All this home discouragement was odious to Monsieur Théophile. It bored and pierced into him, grated on him till not his teeth only but his very bones felt on edge, and his patience, oozing away with his courage, he (if the expression be allowed me) desponded energetically. Like all weak men of his kind, he was furious with those whose feet he would have kissed had they obtained all he wished for without giving him any trouble. He grumbled at Marius Daudel for not having rendered to himself a clearer account of the position, and snarled at Mlle. Mourjon for not having saved him from his own ambitious dreams. He would have bitten the hand of his Egeria had he dared.

Meanwhile Henri Dupont had been so active, and so intelligently served by his various allies, that Olivier's chances did with each day seem to become better and more certain, Olivier himself, however, had relapsed into his indolent ways of heretofore, and the old torpor re-asserted itself so manifestly over his nature that, far from being the one central point of the agitation that was kept up around him, M. de Beauvoisin had the appearance of a spectator rather

indifferent than otherwise to the exciting game that was being played.

His wife found no trace of the bluntly laconic but firm determination with which he had supported her against the curé of Belespoir. She regretted this, and was sorry for his lukewarmness, in not only his own cause, but the cause, as she thought it, of all upright honest men, against an unrighteous government; but it could not be helped. Olivier's nature was not to be changed; but he was certain to be the Deputy for Sâvre-et-Merle for all that. Henri Dupont had so managed matters that the victory was now as good as achieved; and a signal victory it was; and from many quarters at once, from Paris and from the provinces, there came letters to the young Marquise, and to the Dowager, as well as to Count Dupont, full of congratulations and compliments upon the excellent example set by the independent electors of Sâvre-et-Merle. Claire was very proud of the general public esteem which (whether Olivier personally contributed to win it or not) would surround the name Olivier, as her husband, made her wear, and which was to be inherited by her son.

The day after M. de Beauvoisin's return from Paris, Count Dupont, who had been the whole night on the road, driving from one end of the department to the other, and marshalling his forces with consummate generalship, burst into the library at Beauvoisin, where the members of the two families of Beauvoisin and

Clavreuil were seated alone, and, with an explosion of triumphant glee,—

“By the Lord!” exclaimed he, unceremoniously, and shaking hands with each one in turn. “By the Lord! but that has been well played!” and dusty and travel-stained as he was, he let himself drop into an arm-chair covered with delicate-tinted old tapestry, and indulged in a good hearty laugh of self-gratulation. All watched him eagerly (except Olivier, who was seemingly half-asleep upon a rocking-chair), and on Claire’s sweet countenance laughter seemed only waiting for a word to break forth in the effervescence of its brilliancy. “Yes, they are out-manœuvred this time,” recommenced Dupont, when he had drawn breath. “But what tricks will they not be up to to-morrow? Imagine what they had been at! Three days ago I found out that through the whole Combeville district—yours, Monsieur le Comte” (and he bowed to M. de Clavreuil)—“the principal villages had received not one copy of Olivier’s circular, and the inhabitants hardly knew that any canvass for an election was going on.”

“Ah! the Corsican!” muttered M. de Clavreuil.

“Yes, the Corsican, if you will,” echoed Henri Dupont; “but still more the invention of the man at Malleray, who is the master-spirit (the Corsican is a mere subaltern, mischievous as the plague, but a subaltern). Well, what they had imagined was to enjoin upon the tavern-keepers in each locality (they’re all their own spies, all of ’em to a man!) to get hold of the hawkers of Olivier’s circular, make them drunk,

then seize the papers they came to distribute, and lock these up till some agent of authority came to ask for them. I found this out luckily, so I got together twelve of my keepers, fellows I can trust, and caused them to be beforehand with the sub-prefect. They've been at work for twenty-four hours throughout the eastern end of the Department, and there's not a tavern or wine-shop keeper who can stand on his legs in the whole Combeville district! my fellows are as sober as judges, and Olivier's circular is in every man's hands! There's my work since yesterday."

"Bravo! bravo!" came from all sides, mixed with laughter so hearty that no one noticed how silent Olivier was.

"That is all very well," remarked M. de Clavreuil; "and has been a lucky hit for this once, but they (the government people) will begin again; and if they are resolved (as I believe) to carry their official candidate through, they will resort to such means that, do what you will, they will get the better of you. Suppose they falsify the votes, seeing all else fail, (they have done it before now,) what redress have you? Who watches over the urns, pray? Why, they and their hirelings!"

While his father-in-law was speaking, the Marquis de Beauvoisin seemed interested by what he said, and looked at him attentively.

"I am so persuaded of what you say, Monsieur le Comte," replied Henri Dupont; "I am so persuaded that if they are determined to go all lengths (and

Daudel is wholly unscrupulous), they can always carry any election (subject to the public exposure that the vanquished party can provoke later); I am so persuaded of this, that I have another plan in my head, and I shall probably execute it to-morrow morning."

"And that is?" questioned Claire and the Dowager both at once.

"And that is, to pack up the official candidate himself, and send him within forty-eight hours from this back to his Boulevards."

Many-toned were the exclamations of admiration at this declaration.

"I have reconnoitred the position narrowly these few days," continued Count Dupont, "and I am now morally certain that that vagabond, Théophile Mar-donnet, would give his ears to be out of the mess. He did not reckon on a fight, he has not the nerve for that; nor, do I believe, has he a past that can bear inspection, and inspected it shall be; if any one will take up my wager, I will lay one, that by to-morrow night's coach to Chartres I expedite Monsieur Théophile, ticketing him, 'fragile,' and bear the news of his sudden departure to his friend the sub-prefect without the said worthy having so much as guessed at what was going on."

"Well, if you could manage that—" opined M. de Clavreuil.

"That would be first-rate," interposed the Dowager.

"By this time to-morrow it shall be settled," said,

gaily, Henri Dupont; "and now I'll go and get rid of all this dust."

"One moment, Henri," objected Olivier as his friend jumped up from his seat, "you have not asked my opinion; and—" he hesitated, and bending forwards on his rocking-chair, so that no one saw his face, "and," he continued, "I'm sick of the whole thing, and don't mean to be a deputy at all!"

He uttered the last phrase loudly and with great volubility, and, leaving his seat, walked towards a window, turning his back to everybody in the room.

It is difficult, in such cases, to describe the impression produced, and which embodies itself differently in each individual; but, above the various ejaculations which greeted M. de Beauvoisin's sudden proclamation, the one word "Olivier!" pronounced sternly by his mother, was distinctly audible. For the first time it, apparently, failed in its effect.

"He is only jesting," observed Henri Dupont; "how can you seem to take him in earnest? But it is an unseasonable joke," he added, more seriously, and going up to where Olivier stood. "You must remember, my dear fellow, that you no longer stand alone here now; you have set in motion the forces of the opposition in the entire Department, and all this is long past a joke."

Olivier turned suddenly round, and was, this time, evidently at bay.

"I am not joking," he exclaimed; "but I am tired of being made a puppet of, and I will be so no longer."

I hate parties and politics, and will have nothing more to do with them. I have been dragged into all this—as into everything else—against my will.”

“Olivier!” burst forth in Claire’s pure tones, in strong reproachfulness.

“I will not be bullied or cajoled,” he continued. “I will not be treated like a cypher in my own house. I will have my own way like other men, and do that which pleases *me*. I have my own tastes and my own pleasures; and politics have nothing to do with them. I tell you I am sick to death of the whole thing, and it is I who retire from the contest. I have written to the prefect to tell him so; and, as I defy you to make a deputy of me without my consent, I wash my hands of the whole business. I will hear no more of it!” and, with these words, he overstepped the threshold of the window and was gone.

Consternation was many-tongued upon this extraordinary behaviour of Olivier’s. The Dowager said he must be insane; M. de Clavreuil was for strong measures, and forcing him to do his duty; Henri Dupont recommended a few hours’ patience; and Claire, concentrating her indignation into one sentence,—

“These,” said she, “are the fruits of the education you have given him;” and, looking with haughty contempt at the Dowager, she left the room.

Late in the day, Count Dupont caught sight of Olivier in a passage leading to his own apartment. One glance sufficed to show him signs of dejection in M. de Beauvoisin, which ill contrasted with the strange

fierceness of manner he had so recently affected. He darted forwards, and, before his presence was perceived, he was standing close to his friend, and held one of the latter's hands in his own.

"Olivier," he said, with affectionate earnestness (for the countenance he looked upon gave him no desire to do aught save try to soothe), "my dear, good, old fellow, we are far too firm friends for any discussion whatever to sever us. Is it possible you can be serious in what you said this morning?"

Olivier's face was terribly haggard and drawn. He answered nothing, but stared at Henri Dupont as though looking through and beyond him.

"My dear Olivier," continued Henri, "what has happened?"

"Nothing at all," replied Olivier, eagerly. "Happened? why, what should happen?"

"But why, then, this sudden retreat?" urged Count Dupont; "think it well over, my dear Olivier."

"I have thought it well over," was the answer, but this time gently made, though in a tone and with an expression that struck dismay into the hearer.

"And must it be?"

"It must be."

"Olivier," hazarded Dupont, "Claire—your wife—" (he felt the hand he held in his quiver)—"you will lose—is there no means of—"

"None; I cannot help myself, Henri," he added, in utter helplessness; and then, as though suddenly remembering a part he had forgotten to play,—“it is

unbearable!" he exclaimed, in a loud voice, and with a flurried manner; "it is unbearable that one can't have one's own way! No friendship can stand such tyranny!" and, breaking violently from Henri Dupont, he rushed into his own room.

The letter M. de Beauvoisin had received on the 5th of July, contained these words:—

"If the official candidate is not elected, things that occurred seven years ago will be brought to light, and utter ruin ensue. There are people here who have proofs. If you can pass a few hours here to-morrow, I may be able to help you; if not, I see no safety anywhere. Rely on my friendship,

"ASP."

CHAPTER V.

Severed.

Two months had passed by, and the first days of September had come. Things did not exteriorly seem much altered, but deep chasms were yawning between some of those who still appeared to be standing side by side.

Claire was severed from Olivier, and she knew not how near she had been to unity with him. It is one thing to be married and indifferent, another to be married and divided. Between the two there had been an intermediate state, in which, as I have said, the young Marquise had been drawn by circumstance towards her husband, and the every-day habits of wedded life becoming cheerfully established, these two had well-nigh drifted into a certain oneness that, with time, would have grown to imitate affection. Claire rendered to herself no account of this till it ceased. Henri Dupont rendered to himself the clearest possible account of it the instant he saw this pair together, and was so rejoiced, that, when the whole fabric of coming domestic harmony was suddenly threatened by Olivier's conduct about the election, his grief was profound and bitter.

Henri had had great hopes for his friend when he

returned from Paris at the end of June, and was met, as we know, in the woods by M. de Beauvoisin and his wife,—*together!* He had never ventured to hope that any tender feeling would spring up between Olivier and Claire; but of a kindly, affectionate good understanding, he all at once thought he perceived symptoms, and he was delighted in proportion to his surprise. As with all things unexpected—perhaps even undeserved—Henri held more to his new discovery than if it had been a matter of course and long foreseen consequence. It was much more than that; it was a bit of luck—therefore unreasonable; therefore belonging to those hidden treasures that Fate stores up wherewith to gratify blind mortals, and over which all mortals without exception rejoice with childlike impulse. What we have calculated upon, we have already enjoyed in anticipation; when it reaches our hand it is discounted—realised; we know all about it; but of that which is vouchsafed to us all at once, of that which comes to us by chance, we know nothing, and therein lies its charm. There is no one so flat or so low, so prosaic, or so hard, or so narrow, who is not gladdened by the touch of the inexplicable. It is a fresh proof of the mystery of our being, and whether we avow it or not, we all of us rejoice in whatever for even one second makes us dream.

Henri Dupont, plain sailing and practical as he was, held to any little bit of the unexpected as we all do; prized it unconsciously far above any well-deserved long-foreseen result, and was inconsolable at its loss.

It was utterly improbable that the young Marquise should take to liking the husband who had been awarded to her; she was so immeasurably his superior! she was so lovely, so intellectual, so high-minded!

Henri, when he thought of her to himself, characterised her in his own mind as so royal, that her condescending to place herself on M. de Beauvoisin's level was not a fact to be in any way reasonably looked forward to. Olivier did not deserve Claire; that was the plain truth; the logical thing therefore was, that he would not obtain her. But here all at once the most illogical and improbable thing had occurred, and the beautiful, and superior, and regal Claire, had condescended in a certain degree to her slow-witted, dull, heavy, inferior mate; and pleasant intercourse, a cheerful exchange of gentle courtesies, would be established between this pair, their child would grow to be a strong link, and some of the sunshine of life would be there for them to bask in. Olivier would be led by his wife, rescued from the Dowager; it was his salvation; and Henri Dupont counted on the generosity of Claire's nature for becoming attached to what so completely depended upon her.

It was this satisfaction of his which had been overthrown. Annihilated almost as suddenly as created; but annihilated, as he felt, for ever. There could be no mistaking the feeling with which the young Marquise regarded Olivier when he retired from the contest which, in her opinion, he was in honour bound to

carry on. It was a feeling of unmitigated contempt. She would never more relent now; never more soften towards the man whose name had been given to her and whom she looked upon as a discredit to the name.

Claire behaved harshly, it may be said. Perhaps so,—but Claire was too young not to have the excess of her finest qualities; too young to be kind where she did not love; too pure not to have with the bright truth of steel some of its hardness. Claire judged Olivier unworthy, condemned him from the height of a tribunal, whence she deemed it a disgrace ever to descend, and was irrevocably severed from her husband. She judged him all the more severely, too, that she had been recently so near relenting in his favour.

In the Department, the effect produced by the retirement of M. de Beauvoisin was, perhaps, on the whole, less startling than might have been supposed. The Duc de Vivienne was the only person really incensed at first, for he felt himself compromised, and left in the lurch; but his nephew, Gaston, having, at the end of a week or so, made him perceive the chances which Olivier's inexplicable retreat opened in the future before his own candidature, he became gradually pacified, and contented himself with grumbling against the young men of the present day, who did not know their own minds. M. de Clavreuil's anger at the notion of his son-in-law having retired before an antagonist so ignoble as Mardonnet, was counter-

acted by his joy at the fact of so near a relative not playing any part whatever (even that of an independent deputy) under the imperial *régime*. Henri Dupont, whose irritation should have been liveliest, considering that the security of the election was solely owing to his own untiring efforts,—Henri Dupont was silent; sadly so, it is true, but his silence screened M. de Beauvoisin from any immoderate attacks from other people. Claire alone was implacable, for she neither noted, nor cared to note in Olivier that which caused Henri Dupont's compassionate indulgence; a certain air, namely, of deep regretfulness which every now and then stole over Olivier's features, and gave them an expression they had never worn before—an air of hopeless dejection.

This was of rare occurrence, however, but Henri had noted it, and felt pained. Something told him Olivier had a reason for retiring from the electoral contest against Mardonnet—a reason other than the mere purposelessness and feebleness of character which were imputed to him; and what pained him most was that a voice within him warned never to probe Olivier's conscience upon this point with questions. A veil was drawn, and Henri Dupont, out of his very friendship, dared not lift it. To Count Dupont de Laporte, educated as he had been, by a really distinguished man, Olivier had always appeared as morally and intellectually friendless, and in that lay the root of his attachment to him. He pitied him for the little that had been made of him, and disliked the Dowager (as

the Dowager shrewdly guessed) for the total absence of heart she had evinced in the education of her only child. The boy was not worse than other boys; he was not quick-witted, but he was otherwise not more deficient in judgment and common sense than the ordinary run of his compeers. He had no bad instincts, but was, on the contrary, rather of a kind and gentle disposition. Lazy, because slow, and therefore easily dependent, all the defects progressively acquired by Olivier had been grafted upon him by a determinedly perverse process of bringing down, instead of bringing up.

Some days before the election, Olivier left Beauvoisin, and spent the months of July and August between Paris and Homburg and Baden-Baden. To the latter place Madame Claudine had been ordered by the doctors for a slight affection of the larynx, and there she was established for some weeks, with her sagacious lady-in-waiting—the now, to her, indispensable Mlle. Aspasia.

Claire, taking her baby with her, passed the month of July with her mother in the Pyrenees; the month of August at Arcachon for the benefit of sea-bathing; and the month of September at Clavreuil, the home of her girlhood.

CHAPTER VI.

The Old Home.

It was late in the afternoon when Madame de Clavreuil and her daughter arrived at Clavreuil. They had breakfasted at Angoulême, and settled to find a sort of dinner-supper on reaching home.

Having seen her child and his nurse comfortably established in their quarters, Claire proceeded to her own apartment. It was the one she had occupied before her marriage; she had particularly petitioned for this arrangement.

When the young Marquise crossed the threshold of her room a flood of soft mellow sunlight poured golden in through the large, open window, and lighted up all the old whereabouts of her maiden days. Claire had thought she should so like to go back to other times—that she should so enjoy reverting to her period of girlish freedom; but she was doomed to disappointment. Other times were altered, and so was she; and her girlish memories would not consent to afford her any enjoyment now, but just the reverse.

She threw off her travelling attire, and proceeded to examine curiously the various details of her former abode—to see that all was as it was wont to be. All! ut what was all? She was not the same, and the

consciousness of that truth struck to her heart with a sudden, bitter chill.

The wind swept in, as of yore, through the window; the meadows, with their grazing herds, lay green; the ancient trees threw their broad shadows over the ground as heretofore; the same sun wrapt the earth in the same glory—but where was the Claire who had once so loved all this?

She had never been in her own country home since she married; and, in that home, the man whose wife she was had never been a familiar idea, nor had even his name been ever a household word. She turned from the window, and felt miserable.

On the mantel-piece stood, amongst other things, a flower-pot of rare old china, a birthday present of her aunt's. The earth in it was hard and dry as the desert dust; but the sapless stalk and leafless branches of a dead rose-tree were still there. Once, at a family gathering at the châteaux, just two years ago (during the last summer of Claire's girlhood), she had worn in her hair a bright, blood-red rose, broken from the plant that stood withered and blackening there before her—that rose she had given to her cousin Victor. She thought he had asked her for it—thought he cared for it—she must have been mistaken, but she had given it to him.

When the young Marquise went down to dinner, she had not found time to change her dress.

"You look ill, Claire," remarked Madame de

Clavreuil, with gentle solicitude. "You are quite feverish, and your cheeks are burning red."

Claire said railway travelling always made her ill, and that she would go to bed the moment dinner was over.

"You must get well soon," said, gaily, her father, "for there are to be great festivities this month; at Mont Vivienne, the whole province is expected to muster for a shooting-match; and, at Tours, there are to be *carrousel*s, and races, and heaven knows what. By-the-bye, you did not know that Victor's regiment is garrisoned there, and means to carry off all the prizes. They've been there about a fortnight; he came over here to see me yesterday, and is enchanted at the notion of being our neighbour, and of seeing you again."

The ensuing days brought visitors to Clavreuil; all the neighbours came in succession, and among the very first was M. de Lancour.

Claire thought him a little altered in his manner towards herself, a trifle graver than he had used to be, and he seemed to be always watching her, never to take his eyes off her. She was rather inclined to be angry at this, and, unless when strangers were present, and good-breeding constrained her to politeness, she would every now and then indulge in sharp speeches to her cousin, or in curt answers to his questions. He had a way, too, of sending for little Pierre that provoked her. It was as if he thought she was not sufficiently tender for her child. It was a tacitly con-

veyed lesson, and that wounded her. He would get the child's nurse to give him into his arms, and would pass a whole morning in playing with him. It was under his careful teaching that the little man first learned to stand and walk steadily alone, having till then always hung on to some protecting petticoat, and it was due to Victor also, that the zoological utterances of babyhood were transformed into a few intelligible words.

"There," said he, one day, leading the pretty boy up to the young Marquise, "listen to him; he says 'Good morning, mamma,' like a Christian; it has not taken quite a week to teach him."

Madame de Clavreuil laughed. "Upon my word, Victor," said she, "you have mistaken your vocation; you were born to be a nurse-maid."

"All soldiers are," he replied. "I will bet that any man in my regiment (let alone myself) will do more with a baby than a legion of *bonnes* will. We know what we want of the child, and we've plenty of patience."

"Whilst you naturally think women have none, and never know what it is they want," suggested Claire.

"Women very often do not know what they want, my dear cousin," he repeated, quietly; "it is not their fault, but the fault of their education."

"Well, I know that I for one like better to hear a baby speak its baby tongue than the prim words you make it repeat like a parrot," retorted the young Marquise.

"I have a strong objection," added M. de Lancour,

"to anything that degrades a human creature, even in its very earliest stage of existence, and it is degrading to make of it a pet animal or a plaything; a baby is not a toy, not a thing which is to amuse the people about it."

Claire was silent; she thought her cousin was in the right, but would not say so.

Just at this moment Pierre's nurse came to fetch him for his after-breakfast airing, and Henri Dupont came in from the garden with a letter in his hand.

"I have a line from Olivier," said he, trying to look as though that were the most every-day subject in the world. "He writes from Homburg; he will be at home next week."

No one responded to this announcement, and what was going on before went on after it, and as though it had never been made. Madame de Clavreuil bent over her embroidery-frame, Claire, lying back in an arm-chair, dallied with her crotchet needles, Count Dupont studied a newspaper, and M. de Lancour watched the weathercock on one of the towers of the château with seemingly intense interest.

Half an hour later Claire and her cousin were alone, and she, perceiving this, made a move as though to retire also.

"Claire," said the Vicomte, in a tone of voice which always made her attentive, "don't disturb yourself, pray—I am going directly," and he rose, "but I want you to answer me one question before I go."

The young Marquise laid her work on one side, and seemed prepared to obey.

"When it is stated amongst all of you here," he began, "that Olivier is coming home, what does that mean? where is the home he comes to?"

"Well, his own, I presume," replied the Marquise, "Beauvoisin, of course."

"And you, Claire?" added Victor, but in a tone so gentle that it could not by possibility excite irritation,—"and you, my cousin?"

"Oh! I," she replied with just a little hesitation, "I shall stay on here with mamma. I am so very happy here!"

"No! Claire dear, you are not," interrupted Victor tenderly, "and that is it which pains me, pains me sincerely."

His voice was so kind, so affectionate, that Claire was compelled by it, and blushing, looked down in silence.

"My dear Claire," he recommenced almost in a whisper, "are you separated from your husband?"

"Certainly not," was the answer; "how absurd! what could make you fancy such a thing—but really after M. de Beauvoisin's extraordinary conduct this summer, I may be excused if I take refuge for a time with my father and mother in my own old home," and then, for the first time, Claire poured forth the story of her husband's behaviour about the election, and the disgrace which, according to her, had been thereby entailed upon all connected with him.

M. de Lancour listened attentively. "My dearest cousin," said he, when she had ended her story, "disgrace is too strong a term—disgrace is not inflicted upon an honourable name and family by the mere fact of one man not precisely knowing his own mind. When you were made to marry Olivier, those who chose him for you might have known that he was not a genius or a man distinguished for strength of character; but it is too late now to mend matters—you must take him as he is, and make the best of him; a man may become a good honest father and head of a family, yet have no capacity whatever for being a minister or a parliamentary orator."

"But his faithlessness to his engagements, to his friends?" interposed Claire; "it was positively dishonourable to——"

"Hush! hush! dear Claire," replied the Vicomte, "dishonour applies to worse and sterner deeds than these—besides, look at those who might have a right to complain: look at the Viviennes, and at Henri Dupont; they seem to bear but small enmity to Olivier. Why should you be more unrelenting than they are?"

"It really is too bad of you!" cried Claire, jumping up from her seat, and, in the heat of her annoyance, looking straight into her cousin's face, "it is wrong, this perpetual defence of what you know to be indefensible."

"Claire!" said Victor, gravely, "what is wrong is, your perpetual way of making the worst of whatever Olivier does: he is Pierre's father, he will be your

companion through life—make the best of him, in God's name! It is for your own sake I speak, and out of the great affection I bear you; every man has some good points—find out his, and don't quarrel with him if he refuses to gratify family ambition; let him go his own way—he has always seemed to me inoffensive enough as far as that goes; try to make his home and yours happy, but don't worry his life out about politics—it's the rock many a superior woman has split upon; leave him alone for the love of mercy, and don't persecute him beyond his bearing. He may turn out very tolerable as times go, and yet find it totally impossible to make of himself a politician."

Always the same advice! always the same monotonous defence of her husband! Claire could not forgive her cousin for this.

CHAPTER VII.

Everyday Life.

BUT the young Marquise and her cousin were not always of different opinions every time they met; they had in reality so many tastes and feelings in common that, when others were present, and there was no wayward desire on Claire's part to be ill-natured or aggressive towards M. de Lancour, she was so thoroughly charming that he could not choose but admire her cordially, and indulge in a quite allowable pride in his lovely cousin.

It is mostly from these general meetings that preferences spring, for on such occasions women especially like to shine, and even if devoid of vanity wish to please: whatever is best in them comes out. Whereas, when two people are alone, you can never be perfectly sure of what the hidden currents are; diffidence, or pride, or touchiness, or a queer perverse hostility, may so disguise them (to themselves even, and involuntarily) that the impression produced may be the exact reverse of that contemplated or desired. It is only where they are absolutely indifferent that people are perfectly natural, and indifference is born of and engenders nothing.

Now in society the young Marquise de Beauvoisin

had a charm that subjugated everyone. She had read a great deal, and that in three languages, and was possessed of a quickness of perception and a liveliness of imagination that made her conversation singularly attractive, and gave to all she said an incontestible originality. She was besides this a really good musician, but upon the subject of music she had notions of her own, which somewhat stood in the way of any general appreciation of her talents by the public. She held music for a thing precious and delicate in the extreme, and would not consent to regard the interpretation of a great master, or the expression of your own thought in sound, as a mere diversion introduced to get rid of time between a quadrille or a game of croquet. No; upon this point Madame Claire was obstinate, and in spite of her gentle mien, and her soft fawn-like eyes, nothing in the world would induce her to make music with those who were not musicians, or for those who did not sincerely love the art. But there were in the neighbourhood of Clavreuil some few persons who found grace in Claire's eyes, and so it sometimes happened that a whole evening would be spent in the enjoyment of Weber, Mendelssohn, or Beethoven. Once persuaded that kindred spirits were around her, and that she was truly giving pleasure to her hearers, Claire would pass hours at her piano, and identify herself with the master-souls she evoked. She played Chopin beautifully, for her professor had been a Polish lady whose instructor was Chopin himself; but she could only on very rare occasions be induced to play his compositions, for she

seemed to divine in them something too painfully intimate to be lightly indulged. She would often when alone play Chopin half the night through, but that was another form of self-communing in which she much delighted, and which seemed to exercise a peculiarly calming influence over her. Claire was not thought to be, nor did she think herself, of a poetic temperament, but the poetry within her exacted its dues all the same, and luckily for her she paid her tribute, although she did so unknowingly. Therein lay her charm.

This charm M. de Lancour soon felt. Like most men of the African army, he had had time to read and cultivate his mind, and perhaps the very disadvantages of what, for the last three or four years, had been his position in society, had obliged him to create employments for himself which made him independent of the mere crowd out of doors. The world in Europe generally nowadays, but above all in France, is becoming indulgent in the extreme to men who have run away with other men's wives, and made unto themselves eccentric homes; but still, in spite of all this indulgence, and even in France, where, as we have said, it is greatest, there is a difference; there are degrees in the cordiality or familiarity extended towards those who have overstepped certain boundaries. For instance, so long as Claire was unmarried, her father and mother would have only invited M. de Lancour down to Clavreuil on special occasions, family gatherings, when the claims of a nephew and first cousin could

not be overlooked. Till the unfortunate connection with Madame de Mottefort was a patent and public fact, Victor had been a sort of elder brother to Claire, and though the repugnance to the name of Lancour was, as we know, strong in this Legitimist centre, the great military distinction won on so many occasions by Victor, had made his uncle and aunt proud of him personally, in spite of every other consideration. The terrible mistake (that was the form under which it was alluded to) committed by him in regard to his colonel's wife, coincided with his longest sojourn in Algeria, so that till Claire married, she had scarcely any opportunity of remarking that her cousin was in less familiar habits of intimacy with her family than before.

Now that Claire was married, things wore altogether another aspect. She depended solely on her husband, and, if he chose that the Vicomte de Lancour should pass all the days of his life in his house, no one on earth had anything to say about it. Victor's private affairs were now tacitly ignored by everybody. His regiment was garrisoned at Tours, within a dozen leagues of everybody's châteaux, near enough to render its presence available, and far enough off to destroy all necessity for prying into the family lives of its officers, so that the Vicomte was accepted by the surroundings of his new garrison as a most welcome addition to the society of the Department. And what became of Madame de Mottefort, where she was, or whether, indeed, the semi-conjugal connection between her and M. de Lancour lasted still, all this was, by common

accord left in darkness, and unquestioned. People agreed to take Victor as he was, and he was a remarkably agreeable, well brought up, highly educated man; really distinguished, let alone the military renown he had won, and wore with such charming simplicity.

It was quite natural that Victor should be attracted to Clavreuil, it was so very nearly his own home; the Comte and Comtesse de Clavreuil were the nearest relations he had in the world; and, now that Claire was a married woman—however much he might regret the marriage that had been made for her—the fact of her marriage allowed of the most perfectly familiar intercourse between him and her, and, in his loyal and brotherly devotion to the young Marquise, he was determined, if it were possible, to bring her to make the best of Olivier.

Victor was not long before Claire's intellectual superiority struck and impressed him; and, as he was totally free from all embarrassment, and all complication of thought, as far as Claire was concerned, he sought her society more and more when others were around them, and less when there was any chance of their being alone, simply because he perceived that his cousin was not always amiable with him in the latter case, and was invariably charming in the former.

It was seldom now that a day passed without the Vicomte (with or without one or more of his brother officers) coming over to Clavreuil. The regiment was well composed, and the corps of officers consisted principally of young men of birth and fortune, who,

during the Crimean War, had adopted many English modes of life, and were noted for their elegant and expensive habits.

Victor established relays of horses at his uncle's, so that for the men who had three or four horses at command, the dozen leagues' ride from Tours was of no consequence; and a small detachment of the —th Dragoons was almost always to be found at Clavreuil.

Another cause of intimacy sprang up soon between M. de Lancour and his cousin. Claire was not over strong in health, and old Robichon, devoted as he was to all narrow, antiquated French notions about his patients, could not avoid admitting that horse exercise would be beneficial. He would have preferred swimming—it seemed to him more *normal*, as he said—but still, as there was no river near, and no bathing establishment anywhere in the Department, he agreed to accept riding as a substitute. He did not like it, he said, but, at the same time, he did not deny that at Tours he had known of cases where it had been beneficial; true, the patients were English, which made a great difference: Robichon holding that the British female is a nondescript, for which nothing is suitable which regards proper respectable women—"women like everyone else," as he termed it. However, the riding was decided upon, and the duty of teaching devolved upon M. de Clavreuil and upon Victor, whose equestrian feats were renowned even among the Arabs.

As Claire was ignorant of all fear she quickly rode well; but attained sooner to proficiency than to enjoyment. That the exercise did her good, as far as health went, was undeniable; but the set rides she was made to take under her father's supervision, caused her but small pleasure, and when she had performed about a dozen such, varying between a foot's pace, a dignified trot, and a circumscribed canter, she was as far as ever from understanding what the rapture of riding could, in man or woman, possibly be.

"It seems to me very like what the dancing of a minuet at court must have been," she opined, and both M. and Mme. de Clavreuil thought she spoke properly.

One day, towards the close of September (Olivier was expected to arrive upon the morrow), Claire had gone to take her usual ride with her father and cousin, when, at about two leagues' distance from the château, M. de Clavreuil was met by his steward in the dog-cart, and earnestly entreated to accompany him to an outlying farm, in which some repairs were pressingly necessary, said the man. Her father at first proposed to the young Marquise to accompany him; but she had had enough of her ride, and said, besides, that she should be home too late, that there was a dinner party, and that she must have time to dress. The steward urged his request, and Victor suggested that he might be trusted to convey Claire back to Clavreuil, which was agreed to by the Count, after he had elaborately described to his nephew all the various turnings of the road he must take.

They parted: the Count going off with his steward in one direction, and the young Marquise, with her escort, preparing to take another in order to reach her home.

The day was a fine one; but there had been rain in the early morning, and the wind blew from the west, an unsafe quarter.

M. de Lancour and his cousin ambled on quietly, keeping, as they thought, to the instructions given to them by the Count; but at the end of half-an-hour,—

“We must have taken a wrong road,” said Claire; “for there to the left is the church of Belloy with its double steeples—it lies on the road to Blois, and our way goes towards the road to Chartres.”

As an excuse for Claire let it be said that, according to the habits of her kind, she knew no more of the country lying beyond the park precincts of Clavreuil than if she had been in Central Africa; and let it also be remembered how difficult it is to find your way in a land all plain, where between you and the far horizon lie only the same monotonous breadths of flat or gently undulating ground, brown or green as the case may be, intersected by small lines of road, all hopelessly alike, and with no salient objects to guide you as landmarks.

They had lost their way; that soon became, evident; and while they were engaged in acknowledging this fact to themselves, the wind began to rise and a dark shadow to steal over the plains around them.

"There's a shower coming on," said Claire; "and no shelter to be got anywhere."

"As to shelter," replied M. de Lancour, "there is but one shelter in rain, my dear Claire, and that is hard riding. If we can find our way we must ride for it; that is all—I will not be responsible for your catching an inflammation of the lungs."

"There, it is coming down!" cried she, as a rain-drop or two speckled her glove; "now, what are we going to do?"

"I'll tell you!" suddenly exclaimed Victor, looking intently at something he descried to the right: "we must come up with that waggon out yonder; look! you can see it moving in the distance—where that is, there's a road—come!" and off they went across the fields, and as they rode, Claire following her cousin unhesitatingly, the rain began to come down steadily, the sky grew grey all over, and the wind blew hard.

They got near enough to see distinctly the waggon within a few hundred yards, it was on a high road, and two men walked beside it. There was a ditch between the field they were in and the road.

"We must jump it," said the Vicomte, and they had jumped it before Claire knew what she was doing, but she did not find it unpleasant.

When they came up with the waggoners, and inquired their way, they discovered that they were five leagues from Clavreuil, but their road home was no very difficult one. They had to ride straight along

that, which was the Tours-Blois road, through two villages named to them, till they got to the turning into the high-road from Tours to Chartres. Then, their route was simple enough.

"It is an hour's work," observed Victor; "but now, Claire, we must ride in good earnest, for the wind is cold, and you would be chilled in no time; give Medjé her head and trust to her entirely."

Medjé was an Arab mare of Lancour's, that he had lent to his cousin for her riding lessons.

Claire did simply as she was bid, and off they went at a pace that evidently procured the greatest possible enjoyment to their horses.

And this was the first thing that communicated itself to Claire. She felt the joy of the bounding animal under her, and was suddenly transported into what was like a new element. There was a plenitude of life in it, a healthy sense of power, that carried her away out of herself and made her feel triumphant she knew not why, but the sensation was as of triumph. She felt as though she were flying, borne upwards on a cloud, or upon the crest of a wave, or upon the wings of a bird, but detached from earth, and so utterly secure! She was too young a horsewoman to guess at danger, and only felt the glory and pride of the quick rhythmic motion.

The rain poured down, the wind blew, the sky lowered, but Claire thought it all enchanting, and never drew rein till she found herself turning into the long avenue leading up to the château.

Never had she looked so beautiful. On her cheek was a bloom, and in her eye was a light that, lovely as she had always been, made her of a totally different beauty now.

As Victor helped her out of her saddle: "Well done, little Claire!" said he; "why you ride like an Amazon."

"Oh, Victor!" she exclaimed, naturally and joyfully as a child; "that is riding; let us have another ride like that to-morrow," and, transformed for the moment by the strong sensation of an innocent childish pleasure, she looked at him as she would have looked at Henri Dupont, or any one comparatively indifferent to her, and was in fact absorbed by the thoroughly new joy that she had just tasted.

"Get away as fast as you can," urged Lancour; "and change your clothes from head to foot—you're drenched to the skin."

"Never mind that," she replied, laughing; "only promise me such another ride to-morrow—it's absolutely divine!" And on receiving his promise, readily given, she darted indoors.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Ball.

THIS gallop through the rain produced so strong an impression upon the young Marquise that for the next few days her whole mode of being seemed modified. She, who was habitually so quiet as to be almost grave, was now possessed by the love of active movement; and she whose chief occupations had been sedentary and intellectual, was learning to feel all the exhilarating influence of exercise in the open air.

Madame de Clavreuil was, if the truth must be told, just a trifle shocked at the change in Claire's manners, and she was terribly afraid of her so perfectly well-trained daughter and pattern for young French wives becoming inoculated with the dreadful fast habits of Englishwomen—of those boisterous, hoydenish persons of whom she had heard and read, but of whom she thanked heaven she had never counted one in her own individual acquaintance.

There was a buoyancy now in Claire that added a fresh and altogether a different charm to the charms for which she had hitherto been remarkable. It was for the most part a purely physical modification she was undergoing; it was the sudden and healthy assertion of a force as yet undeveloped within her; but the

mental portion of it existed too, and this led her to feel that for the first time she had found a genuine distraction. She knew now of a real remedy for discouragement and despondency, knew that there was a means by which she could momentarily escape from the pressure of sad thoughts; and she resorted to it eagerly.

There awoke in Claire de Beauvoisin that which lies dormant in every well-constituted healthy human creature, namely, the thirst for life. She longed to live, to feel, to enjoy, to test the power of being within her, and to prove upon herself her own capacity of vitality. She was not the first upon whom the passion of riding has seized in such a conjuncture, not the first to whom the "rapture of riding" has been a refuge.

Every day was devoted by the young Marquise to a riding party, and I am sorry to have to record that the minuet-like performances of the Count, her father, were somewhat undutifully set aside. Claire rode for riding's sake, rode hard, and for the love of the mad rush through the air; whilst to her father riding was an art, and he practised it correctly, never violating rules or precepts. M. de Clavreuil would still accompany his daughter in her excursions, but as she now mostly surrounded herself with comparatively unscientific cavaliers—men whose school had been the fantasia of Arab chiefs—the Count was unceremoniously left to his *haute école*, and distanced by the irregulars of Claire's cavalry.

The day after the young Marquise's memorable

ride in the rain, Olivier arrived, and though his advent was palpably indifferent to his wife, yet, woman-like (I won't attempt to deny it), she took advantage of his coming to get her new enjoyment sanctioned, and she was content that her husband should be one of her constant attendants, because, as her husband, his presence authorised any excess of equestrianism she might choose to commit.

This again was a little bit of unconscious dishonesty on Claire's part, who was otherwise the most loyal, honest, conscientious person breathing: she knew that her sudden taste for horse exercise would please Olivier beyond description, and she meant to profit by this disposition of his, without in the slightest degree rewarding him for it. These are the small moral frauds committed by the best and most exemplary women, and for which, as education and society are at present organised, no one has the least right to blame them.

But life blossomed forth in Claire upon all points at once. She expressed more promptly and vigorously whatever impression she received. When she drew, her strokes were more masterly; when she played, her touch was more full of soul; when she spoke, her words illumined her thought instantaneously—life, in short, was brimful in her, and running over. There has probably never been man or woman to whom this has not once happened, only neither they nor those around them may have noted it.

The Department had been busy with several events during the last three weeks. There had been races at

Tours and at Blois, and agricultural meetings at Mal-leray and at Brunoy, besides private fêtes at different châteaux, amongst which the shooting matches at Mont Vivienne had shone conspicuous. It was not only because these latter festivities were upon the most magnificent scale, and constituted an innovation in a French province, that they created such a sensation; it was also because they were said to be given on account of an event which would be of the greatest importance to the whole district, the approaching marriage, namely, of the Duc de Vivienne's only daughter with her cousin Gaston. And the report proved true, and by degrees the two families (both established at Mont Vivienne) confided the project discreetly to their intimate friends, and it was known that on the fifteenth of October (St. Theresa's Feast) the wedding ceremony would take place at the residence of the bride's father, and be celebrated with little short of regal splendour. Meanwhile, this became a motive for fresh gaieties, and what were called the leading families vied with each other in offering fêtes to the future bride and bridegroom and their parents.

A ball was decided upon at Clavreuil; invitations were distributed all over the Department, and gladly accepted. All vexation consequent upon the failure of the electoral projects of the summer having apparently worn away, the whole clan of the Viviennes promised to come to Clavreuil, as much almost as the guests of M. de Beauvoisin and his wife, as of the actual proprietors of the place, for the certain date of Olivier's

return was duly ascertained before the day for the ball was definitively fixed.

Claire put the same animation into her preparations for this entertainment as she did now into everything she undertook, and anticipated seemingly a larger amount of enjoyment from it than from any of the magnificent receptions which, in Paris, left her more or less indifferent.

The night of the ball came, and with it every individual of any note or standing for twenty or thirty miles round. People came from Blois, from Chartres, and from Tours, and the châteaux of the frontier departments contributed their quota of fair women and dancers, who would consent to dance. Of what in England would be termed the county society, no one failed; of the official world, the Préfet and Receveur-Général only had been invited (and that by a quite unusual concession on M. de Clavreuil's part); but neither of them chose to come, not caring to risk their dignity as government functionaries in the midst of an assemblage of persons whose importance was derived from their birth and social standing, and whose proficiency in all the delicate arts and wiles of insolent politeness was proverbial.

Military authorities, on the contrary, were to be met on all sides, and not a general or colonel who commanded within any possible distance had been omitted from the list of the invited, or had neglected to profit by the invitation.

Clavreuil was wanting in anything that could be

called splendour, but it had that which, aided by the decorative taste of the French, suffices for all the purposes of splendour, namely, space. The château dated from the time of Henri IV., and between its two enormous square towers at each end, and the eight-windowed *corps de logis* which connected them, there was a ground floor containing vast lofty halls, and rooms in which six or seven hundred people could have been easily entertained, without counting the broad and very handsome stone terrace, approached from each side by a flight of ten or twelve steps, and on which the ground floor windows to the front all opened. With the help of flowers and lights, both employed to profusion, the interior of the château of Clavreuil, on the night of the ball, looked exceedingly well, and presented all the external aspects requisite to what is denominated by those bidden to it a magnificent fête.

"How surprisingly lovely Claire is to-night," said Madame Beaudouin to her sister-in-law, Madame de Clavreuil. Madame Beaudouin had arrived two days before, to her niece's great delight.

And Madame Beaudouin was right, nothing more beautiful than the young Marquise could be imagined. She was very simply dressed, and moved about in her creamy folds of soft muslin like a young immortal cloud enswathed. It is true that if the simplicity of appearance was extreme, that did not mean that the cost of such simplicity was small, for the Valenciennes which trimmed the muslin was lace of a hundred francs a yard, and twenty yards at least had been required.

The price was dear, but the taste was pure—which is all that should now be asked from Frenchwomen. For her head-dress Claire wore only one large pale straw-tinted rose, with its long thick bud and its dark-green waxy-looking leaves and thornless stalk: and the masses of her superb hair twined and rolled themselves in plaits and tresses round her head, or escaped in curls and waves light and cloud-like as the folds of her dress.

Madame de Clavreuil watched her daughter with satisfaction, but a satisfaction mixed, as it seemed, with anxiety, lest Claire should, in her animation, overstep the boundaries which, by immutable custom, hedged in the demeanour of women of her high rank and spotless reputation. Madame Beaudouin, on the contrary, grew joyful with Claire's joy, and brightened as her every glance followed her much loved niece about.

"As usual, my Claire is the queen of the fête," said she fondly to the young Marquise, as the pause in a waltz brought the latter close to her.

Claire turned round, and, putting her arm round her aunt's waist, with a sudden and indescribably graceful movement, "You will always spoil me, Aunt Clémentine!" she exclaimed, imprinting a kiss on Madame Beaudouin's cheek.

"Child! child!" cried the latter, laughing; "what will all the solemn set say?"

"Oh; never mind, aunt, dear!" pleaded Claire; "I never amused myself before."

"And you really are amusing yourself now, my

darling?" replied Madame Beaudouin, tenderly, and surveying gladly the rose-bloom of her niece's cheek, and the radiance of the smile in her eyes and on her lips.

"I think so," answered Claire, as she floated away again into the midst of the waltz with her partner.

Yes! Claire thought this was really pleasure, and she gave herself up to it, as she had done to the bounding strides of her horse, the first time she had ridden freely and unhindered through unenclosed space.

Claire did not know that what had seized upon her and was whirling her along was merely excitement, a word whereof she ignored the sense. But as life was strong within her, and she had had few of the aims for which life is spent, she readily abandoned herself to the current which offered to transport her.

The lights, the perfume of the flowers, the music, the admiration she called forth, all combined to heighten in Claire a sense of enjoyment she had never before experienced; and for the first time (she must be forgiven for she knew not what she did), for the first time she felt a strong irresistible wish to charm M. de Lancour, to produce upon him an impression that should still leave her unharmed and to all appearance unconscious, but should disturb the placidity of his purely fraternal feelings for her. Of course this was very wrong on Claire's part, and I am not going to excuse her for it, but so it was. The one idea that drove her onwards, that, vague and undefined, subjected her involuntarily—was the idea of making her

cousin Victor in love with her! There was no pre-meditation in all this, no *malice prepense*, no lack of virtue; there was the sudden awakening of the eternal feminine instinct in a creature full of undirected life.

Nicely scrutinised, it would have been seen that at that identical moment Claire loved Victor less than she had ever done before, but she aspired to dominion over him: to an ill-defined sort of power that, as I said before, was not to hurt her but only him; and not seriously to hurt either, for he was only for an hour to be passionately in love with her, and then forget all about it.

The truth is, that Claire's beauty and animation were such on that night, that everyone present was impressed. Henri Dupont raved loudly about her, Gaston de Vivienne (when his *future* was not within earshot) declared that she was the loveliest woman in all France; and even her own sex were agreed upon her extreme loveliness, only they said that she knew it (which always seems to be a great crime in their eyes), and that her manners were not quiet enough, which seemed to afford them consolation.

Olivier had for the last hour been watching his beautiful wife from a seat in one of the windows. Between a polka that had just finished, and a waltz that was about to commence, he, after much apparent hesitation, came up to her.

"May I take one tour de valse with you, Claire?" he said, timidly.

She was standing in the midst of a group of ad-

mirers, biting daintily with her dazzling teeth and ruby lips at the flowers in her bouquet of tea-roses. When he spoke, she lowered the hand that held the nosegay, and crossed it on the other snowy hand and arm, looking queenly.

"Monsieur le Marquis," said she, with dignified grace, and smiling radiantly, "I really cannot allow you to incur such ridicule as that! No husband waltzes with his wife."

Olivier bowed and retired, not without evident embarrassment, for he was evidently pained. Later in the evening, M. de Lancour petitioned for a waltz. Claire absolutely flashed with brilliancy, as though sunbeams were running in her veins, and then with a ringing laugh no one ever heard her laugh before or since,—

"My dear Victor!" she retorted, "you do not know how to waltz!"

At these words (which were true; M. de Lancour did dance very badly, and therefore seldom danced at all), a shout of laughter came from all around, in which Victor himself most frankly and good-humouredly joined.

"Quite right, Claire," he answered; "but really you are so omnipotent to-night, that you make one forget oneself altogether, and whatsoever one knows or does not know;—perhaps, while looking at you, I fancied I should be inspired all at once, and turn out a prize-waltzer!" And this was said with an admiration and a familiarity felt to be allowable between

two people brought up as brother and sister. There was nothing more.

A little later M. de Lancour seated himself beside the Duchesse de Varignan, who had come over with the party from Mont-Vivienne, where she was staying. She rarely danced, for she thought one of her great charms lay in the fulness and roundness of her outlines, and that too quick movements did not show her off to advantage. She seemed to be making herself vastly agreeable to M. de Lancour, for he remained till supper-time by her side, chatting and laughing unceasingly; and after supper, while the cotillon was at its height, Claire saw her cousin Victor cross the ball-room, giving his arm to the Duchesse, and guide her towards the terrace, where, under the flower-filled awning that had been erected, they could continue their conversation probably more at their ease.

Claire's gladness was all gone. She wondered how she came to refuse to waltz with her cousin. What could have prompted her, Claire de Beauvoisin, of whom no one had ever spoken lightly, to such a piece of under-bred flippancy? What business had she to indulge in such a silly, vulgar, schoolgirl-like triumph? A triumph that? What must Victor think of her? What could it possibly matter whether he danced ill or well?

Poor Claire! her little hour of fluttering coquetry was past, and she felt singularly sad.

CHAPTER IX.

A Startling Fact.

M. DE BEAUVOISIN had been hurt by what had passed; more hurt than my reader may perhaps be able to understand, and far more so than he himself could by any means account for.

Here was a man, married to a woman who was indifferent to him (he supposed she was no more than that), and to whom he was tolerably indifferent; a man who had been caught in the toils of a Traviata, and who, from many causes, and whether he liked it or not, was on that side inextricably entangled; yet who, because his own wife was beautiful and admired, was suddenly seized with the desire to profit by the circumstance that legally he was her husband. A week before, he was behaving 'as though Claudine had charms for him, behaving in a way to make her imagine that he cared for her. Aided by our sagacious friend, Aspasia, Olivier had surrounded this intrigue with impenetrable secrecy, but Olivier was Claudine's lover all the same; that was a fact, and not to be denied. Another equally patent fact was, that in all M. de Beauvoisin's whole being there was not one quality which could enable him to appreciate Claire, or lead him to be impressed by her excellencies.

They had nothing in common; he knew it, and had avowed it to Henri Dupont. Yes; but that was quite in the beginning, when they were really very distant one from the other, and when it seemed the natural consequence of marriages such as theirs that they should be so. But since then there had intervened the little episode we know of touching the election, and Olivier had felt how pleasant it was to be on terms of cheerful kindly familiarity with his pure radiant wife. It had raised him in his own opinion; it was pleasant beyond anything he had ever experienced. But it was over. For ever over. Well! Olivier's, which was a very ordinary nature, "got the better," as it is called (though the truer expression would be "got the worse"), of all this, and when, having decided to try the distractions of German watering-places, he found the Sphinx in the same town with himself, he quietly reverted to the habits he had suspended, not broken off, and managed to pass his time in a sort of imitation "affair of the heart."

But when he came back and saw Claire in the new phase of her beauty, it was her beauty only that struck him, and this was altogether a new situation to him, and he could not quite understand it. When M. de Beauvoisin made up his mind to ask his wife for just one turn of a waltz, he had lost sight completely of the high-minded sovereign lady to whose approbation and perhaps even affection he had been, a few months previously, so pleased to fancy he might aspire, and whose resentment had so lowered him in his own

esteem. Her refusal now wounded him in a very complex manner; and at the end of a few moments M. de Beauvoisin left the ball-room, and bent his steps towards the staircase leading to the first floor. As he was crossing the billiard-room, which was empty, he was met by M. de Moranges, who had come from Paris two days before on purpose to be present at the ball at Clavreuil.

"I've had enough of it all," said Olivier. "Do you find it amusing?"

"Not I," responded his uncle. "I've had enough, like you; only one does not know where to go in these cases. When people have turned their houses out at windows, there is too much noise to think of sleeping, and nobody has anything to say to one; if you happen to have a taste for roaming about in the gardens, and looking at the moon, you may escape that way, but if not——"

"Well," interposed Olivier, "I was making off to the smoking-room——"

"I never smoke," retorted M. de Moranges.

"Will you sup?" said his nephew; "I'll order a cold fowl into my room up-stairs, and we can have some of that Château Yquem we had at dinner."

M. de Moranges agreed, and Olivier having taken the measures necessary for ensuring their repast, the uncle and nephew adjourned to a room on the second-floor, which was given up to the Marquis de Beauvoisin as a salon in which to receive his friends.

They supped, though, as it would seem, neither

with much appetite; but to the Château Yquem they did honour.

"Oh! life is such a bore," at length said Olivier, in answer to some remark of his uncle's, "that the wonder to me is how one does manage to get through day after day."

"A bore?" repeated M. de Moranges, "that I should not quite say; a take in, yes! a mistake," he added, after a pause of a second, "a complete mistake."

"God knows it is a blank to me!" rejoined his nephew; and then, hopelessly, and throwing himself back in his chair, and examining the ceiling; "I give you my honour I don't know what to make of it; I can find nothing to do with my time."

"That may possibly be because you have nothing to do," suggested the uncle, with a gentle irony that was wholly unperceived by his interlocutor; "but it cannot be denied that you have everything in life which, according to preachers and moralists, ought to make you enjoy it; I won't speak of position or wealth, (that would be styled worldly!) but what a home!" (Olivier ran two fingers drearily through his curly fair hair), "what a mother!" (Olivier winced), "and what a wife: there is not another like her!"

Olivier rose from the table, went to the open window, gave a stare at the moonlit landscape, and turning round, "Don't let us speak of Claire," said he, moodily; "Claire hates me."

M. de Moranges did not appear horrified or even startled by this announcement; he swept a few crumbs

from the tablecloth with his little finger, and, after a pause of a second or two, "Hate is probably too much," he remarked; "she may not love you; but if you do not love her, it is not of much consequence. Do you love your wife, Olivier?"

Olivier was completely taken off his balance by the question; such a quantity of conflicting thoughts and images rose up all at once in his brain, that he stared in stupid silence at the questioner.

"There are those who declare love, I mean pure, moral, domestic love, wedded love if you will, to be the secret of happiness," continued M. de Moranges; "if it be so, you seem to me to be in the best possible condition for proving it; never had husband so adorable a wife; but that means nothing, for love is quite unreasonable."

These last words were uttered in a tone that was not without sadness.

"Uncle," exclaimed Olivier, seemingly perplexed in the extreme; "I don't know myself how it stands between Claire and me. I have always let her have her own way in everything, and we seemed to be on the best and politest terms; but somehow, in the main, we never really got on together. It isn't worth thinking of now; but some months ago I fancied Claire could really like me, and——" he stopped and breathed hard; "well, as I say, it's no matter now—that's all over, and she hates me."

"And you would love her if she would let you?" observed his uncle.

Olivier, without replying, merely looked steadfastly at M. de Moranges, who returned the gaze.

"At all events, you are convinced she cares for no one else?" and the tone in which this was spoken was a singular one.

"She is too cold and too proud to love at all," was M. de Beauvoisin's rejoinder, and there was a shade of bitterness in it.

M. de Moranges leant his head upon his hand, and appeared plunged in thought. Gradually his look fixed itself upon his nephew, and, biting his nether lip, and, busy as it seemed with some internal problem he could not solve,—

"Olivier," said he, "will you do me a service? I think I can trust you."

M. de Beauvoisin started, for the voice that addressed him was unlike that he knew; it was the voice of a man with an unsteady purpose, or who is a prey to some great anxiety—both were unlike his reckless Don Juan of an uncle.

"Trust me to the death—I will do whatever you ask me," answered Olivier, with a semblance of animation quite unnatural to him, and produced by a vague apprehension he could not account for.

"You saw a great deal of Claudine at Homburg, did you not?" asked M. de Moranges; "saw her nearly every day, and every evening?" Luckily the uncle did not look at his nephew while addressing him, for the latter grew suddenly so pale that he must have been struck by it; but his own question appeared to

fill him with embarrassment, and he spoke indistinctly, hurriedly, and low.

"I saw her often; yes," rejoined Olivier, trying to look unconcerned, "more of a day than of an evening."

"And of an evening she received others?"

"I think so—I am not sure—Yes! I think she received sometimes—." (M. de Beauvoisin was at a loss to discover what his uncle was driving at.)

There was another pause, M. de Moranges supported his head upon his left arm, with his right hand he drew patterns on the tablecloth.

"Did Florestan de Nesves stay there all the time?" he at last inquired.

Olivier breathed more freely, and the colour came back to his cheeks.

"I don't believe Nesves was there at all," he objected.

M. de Moranges fixed a very keen look full upon his nephew.

"Olivier, be true to me—don't go over to the other side," he said, with an expression of countenance not precisely reassuring; "I am all but certain he was there—I could almost swear to it."

"But, you know, I was not at Homburg the whole time—I went over to Baden very often, and at last staid there; besides, my dear uncle," (he was getting bold now), "what jealousy could you have of——?"

"Jealousy?" echoed his uncle, trying to look proud and indifferent, "jealousy! who talks of jealousy?"

I should think not, indeed—but I will not have her ill spoken of—and I have my reasons for what I say, and that is why I have decided to trust you. Just listen to this: last July I was in Paris, and came home one night earlier from the club than was my wont; the date is fixed in my memory, it was the 6th. Instead of going up the great staircase, I went through the ground-floor rooms, to the spiral staircase from the library to the first-floor—the window of the morning-room was open to the garden, and on the lawn I saw the shadow of a man going down the walk towards the garden gate. The man himself was hidden. I am certain that man was Florestan de Nesves.”

“And—you did not attempt—you did not think of—following him?” M. de Beauvoisin’s heart beat so strongly, that he found it difficult to articulate clearly.

“No!” was the reply in a whisper. “I neither followed, nor questioned—but I have tried to watch narrowly ever since. If I were your age, Olivier, I would not mind people guessing; but, at mine, one must avoid ridicule.”

“But why should you suspect Nesves?”

“Who else should it be? He admires her evidently.”

“Well, my dear uncle, I will devote myself to your service,” assured M. de Beauvoisin; “you wish me to discover whether there really is any cause for supposing that matters have gone too far between Madame Claudine and Nesves?”

"I do," murmured M. de Moranges.

"I cannot help thinking you will find out there is nothing at all."

A sudden and fervent "God grant it!" escaped from his uncle's lips.

"And, if the worst comes to the worst," he added, trying to assume an off-hand air, "why for a man like you, the loss of such a woman as that could be of no consequence."

"We need not speculate on the worst," replied Moranges. "I may be mistaken—I would not wrong her."

M. de Beauvoisin was lost in a maze, and, utterly ignorant of what a passion of this kind may make, at fifty-five, of a man who has never loved, he showed the surprise he felt.

"My dignity requires that I should know the truth," observed M. de Moranges, acting up to the last to what had been the part played through life.

"But if the truth were what we will hope it is not?" suggested Olivier, not very well knowing what to say.

The look that for a moment passed over his uncle's features was one that could not be forgotten when once seen. It was a pitiful combat between anguish and pride, and even the opaque perception of Olivier seized the fact of its being a life and death struggle in the soul of his uncle. As the latter stood before him now, ten years seemed to have been added to his age.

No further word was uttered, but M. de Beauvoisin

recognised with considerable dismay the danger into which Claudine's passion for him was leading him. A gulf was yawning at his feet, and for the present he saw safety nowhere.

At fifty-five! the hardest liver of the epoch! Was this the vengeance Love took for half-a-century of scorn?

For the moment Olivier forgot all about Claire, and his own feeling of perpetual boredom in life.

CHAPTER X.

Love, the same in All.

THERE was strength in Claire, and, therefore, she suffered strongly. Partly from ignorance, partly from excitement, she had been led into behaving as it was not natural to her to behave—into doing that which was most contrary to her character, to her habits of life—in a word, to her whole self. This happens more frequently to us all than we are inclined to admit, and is the cause of severe vexation of spirit.

Had Claire been unfriendly to M. de Lancour, had she treated him with coldness or discourtesy, with haughtiness or disdain, she would not have minded (she had, as we know, shown him anything but cordiality since her marriage), but she could not forgive herself for behaving towards him in a manner that it was unbecoming for her, Claire de Beauvoisin, to assume; a manner that—coolly reflected upon—must be to him inexplicable, and for which she had, at the bottom of her heart, but one explanation, humiliating in the extreme.

Claire—the pure, refined, high-minded Claire—she who, whatever happened, was determined that, to the end of time, her cousin should look up to her in his memory as to a bright, particular star—she had carried

herself after the fashion of some shopkeeper's daughter (or worse), and actually paraded a want of breeding, a stupid levity that, unless through the action of temporary insanity, it was impossible to conceive in her. She had been coquettish, frivolous, flippant, and for what? She knew, but dared not own. It was like a dream. And the penalty incurred? from that she turned in indescribable dread. Victor, whose notions about women (notions have nothing to do with actions) were so strict—what would his judgment be upon her?

Nor was that all. There was worse still. Worse? could worse then be? There was a last deep pit of anguish to which Claire, if she descended, went alone and in the dark. She shrank from seeing what was there to hurt her, but she smarted from the pain.

After a sleepless night, Claire, on the morrow of the ball, sought her one comforter in all trouble, Madame de Beaudouin, and, when the occupations of the forenoon were over, the aunt and niece strolled forth together into the park.

The day was balmy and bright, and the deep verdure of summer was only here and there yielding to the more gorgeously varied autumn tints. Madame Beaudouin loved nature with an almost passionate intensity, and was an indefatigable walker. The two strayed beyond the limits of Clavreuil, talking little, but seemingly taking pleasure in the mere fact of each other's society.

The last words that had been exchanged on the

previous night between Madame Beaudouin and Claire had been words of joyfulness on the latter's part. The bloom upon her cheek and the light in her eye were matched by the gladsome ring of her young voice, as she had said, "I never amused myself before!"

Why was it Madame Beaudouin felt that all this was altered, and that a shadow had fallen over her niece's joyous mood? She could not have told you, but the proof that she so felt was that she spoke to Claire upon indifferent subjects only, and did not even allude to the fête of the previous night.

They reached the edge of a road, on the other side of which was a considerable plantation of pines and larches, fine, stoutly-growing young trees. They crossed the plantation, and emerged upon a common overgrown with gorse and furze; a few hundred yards in front the ground gave a sudden dip, and beyond that the smoke curling up from a chimney showed that you were on the edge of a small valley.

"This is about the only picturesque bit in the whole country," said Madame Beaudouin, "or, at least, in the Clavreuil portion of it; there runs the Savre at the bottom of that little ravine, and the smoke you see comes from the cottage by Mathurin's mill."

She walked on, followed by Claire, till they reached the spot where the ground dipped down towards the river, and, compared with the rest of the flat bare landscape, this certainly was, as Madame Beaudouin had said, picturesque.

Madame Beaudouin proposed to sit and rest awhile,

and when her niece had seated herself by her side, "Claire," she asked; "do you mean to say that you have forgotten this place?"

"Well," replied the young Marquise, hesitatingly; "I fancy I remember it faintly, but I could not have found my way here. Mathurin is the Clavreuil miller, is he not?"

"To be sure," murmured Madame Beaudouin, thoughtfully, and as though speaking to herself, "nine years, at your age, constitute nearly half a life! but don't you remember a picnic that was got up here for you, Claire? it was in the month of July, after your first communion. You took your first communion in Paris in May, and we all came down here in June. I spent the whole of that summer at Clavreuil. Don't you remember that, to please you, we arranged a picnic at Mathurin's mill down there, and you amused yourself so immensely, that, in the evening, driving home between your mother and me, you did nothing but repeat, over and over, that, in all your life to come, it was impossible you could ever amuse yourself so much again? I remember it all as if it was yesterday."

"I think I do remember it," said Claire, in a low tone, and turning away her head.

Alas! they who love, and think they know us best, never know what they disturb when they begin to rake about amongst our old memories. From the day of that very identical picnic at Mathurin's mill, had dated Claire's first serious preoccupation of spirit touching her cousin Victor. She was a child not yet twelve, he had been

two years an officer, and was just home from Algeria to recover from a wound.

Claire sat still and silent, drifting back into the past and comparing it with the present, till, absorbed in her own personal troubles, she lost sight of certain small fitnesses and gradations, and, without any transition whatever,—

“Aunt,” said she, abruptly, “what is it people see in Elise de Varignan? What charm can she possibly have for men?”

Claire was jealous, and one quarter of an hour’s genuine jealousy will make more havoc in a human mind (no matter how well regulated) than will a whole twelvemonth of hopeless hidden love.

Madame Beaudouin bent forward, and laying her hand gently on her niece’s shoulder,—

“Are you quite sure, my darling,” said she, in reply to the question so abruptly put, “are you quite sure that Madame de Varignan has the charm you speak of?”

Claire blushed, and looked confused.

“Why,” she retorted, “only look at Olivier!” (as if he, poor fellow, had anything at all to do in the case!) “Look at them all,” she added, “those bold, brazen ways of hers seem to fascinate them.”

“She is more than merely bold, she is coarse,” observed the aunt.

“Well!” rejoined the niece, bitterly, “I suppose it is that that causes her success?”

“Don’t be led into thinking that, my Claire,” re-

sponded Madame Beaudouin gravely, "it is the greatest mistake imaginable; all men have a horror of coarseness in women; they put up with it, because they can't help themselves, and because they can't put it down; but they recoil from it so strongly that they become invulnerable. Coarse women make a loveless age—like ours."

Claire relapsed into silence, and sat by the side of Aunt Clémentine, gazing in mute dreaminess at the peaceful scene before her. The rays of the sun lay palely golden upon the vine-clad rising ground on the other side of the river; the heavens were all one sheet of delicate blue, with here and there a streak of milk-white cloud; all was hushed around, save for the faint ripple of the water over its reedy bed; and the only trace of active life was to be found in the aspect of a team of oxen yoked to a cart, and standing motionless in a distant field, their outlines darkly drawn against the clear evening sky. Aunt Clémentine absorbed delightedly the calm of all around her: Claire did not. It rather oppressed her.

Five o'clock was struck by some church bell far off, and floated, as it were, whisperingly across the plains. Madame Beaudouin suggested the propriety of returning homewards, for they had more than an hour's walk before them. They quickened their pace, but once again they spoke little. As they recrossed the pine and larch plantation and approached the road, they heard voices and the tread of horses' hoofs. When they stepped upon the road, they perceived three horse-

men close behind them: Henri Dupont, M. de Lancour, and a brother officer of the latter's.

Lively greetings were exchanged, and the remainder of the way back to Clavreuil was undertaken together; the equestrians escorting the young Marquise and her aunt. Naturally, the subject of conversation was the fête of the night before; and each one had some remark to offer, or some incident to relate. Claire put on the mask which society decided she had to wear, assumed the part it was her business to perform, and was charming and graceful, pleasant and what, in a lesser woman, might be called chatty, but she was not her own self.

"Gaston de Vivienne has wonderfully improved," observed Madame Beaudouin.

"He's a very fine fellow," added Henri Dupont; "and has in him the stuff of a man beyond the ordinary run."

"If the world—his world, I mean—don't spoil it all," remarked Victor.

"He'll grow too large," opined Victor's brother officer.

"Herminie is quite delightful," said Claire; "not exactly handsome, but thoroughly charming. I don't know when I've seen so nice a girl."

"Well, they call it a love-match," resumed Henri Dupont.

"Ah!" dropped from Claire's lips, almost unconsciously.

"So I had heard," added Aunt Clémentine; "and

I confess that made me look at them with interest. I am inclined to believe it is true, and that they are very much attached to each other."

"*Peste!*" ejaculated the young officer; "they have no complaint to make of fortune. Birth, rank, wealth, good looks, and a love-match to crown all! Two millions a year, and Mont-Vivienne, and the wife you've chosen for yourself! I must say I call that too much."

"It certainly is a prodigious case of suitableness in marriage," observed Henri Dupont.

"Perhaps," said M. de Lancour. "But I confess I have an objection to marriages between cousins."

"What an odd idea!" retorted his brother officer. "And for what earthly reason? Nothing is more common, now-a-days—it keeps property together. Why shouldn't cousins marry?"

"They do marry every day," repeated Victor; "but I can only say that, in a general way, I don't think a marriage between cousins a good thing."

CHAPTER XI.

Love Strong in Death.

A FORTNIGHT passed, and every day brought the young Marquise together with her cousin; mostly, too, amongst other people, so that it was seldom that Claire was seen otherwise than to her great and marked advantage.

There was, however, again a change in her. She had relapsed afresh into her old quiet ways, and Madame de Clavreuil began to feel reassured touching the danger that had once seemed threatening, of her daughter becoming like unto an Englishwoman, and fast. Poor Claire! there was nothing fast about her now, nothing at all resembling one of those fabulous British dames, rampant and noisy, horsey and self-indulgent, which haunt the dreams of proper French mothers in this dreadfully cosmopolitan age. Claire was quieter than formerly: subdued even, rather than calm, and gentle exceedingly. Her voice, her look, her step, all were softer, slower; in short, as I said, subdued; and, just as, some weeks before, there had been a rising and swelling of the current of life within her, so now its ebb-tide had come, and her joy and pride of living was reduced.

Claire had never been so lovely in the eyes of those

who, when appreciating a woman's beauty, take into account her immaterial part. Olivier thought she was a little gone off, and not nearly so attractive as before; he supposed the perpetual gaieties of the province tired her. But, after all, it was no business of his.

Aunt Clémentine thought she was like nothing so much as the beautiful blush rose she had worn in her hair on the night of the great ball; but she said nothing, only she was anxiously tender to her niece.

Victor lived amongst people for whom the young Marquise was a perpetual object of interest; no day went by without his having heard her praised, without his having been himself obliged to devote to her, present or absent, a considerable portion of his attention—perhaps even more when absent than when present, for Olivier's fair wife was a theme for unceasing speculation. "Was she happy?" there soon came to be the great question. It concerned none of those who asked it, but it busied them none the less for that. That she was virtuous all knew—pure, spotless as the snow on untrodden heights—but was she condemned to an eternally unloving life? Where truth is, give but a small lapse of time, and it will appear; it was soon an admitted fact that the young Marquise did not love her husband. How was this discovered? none could say. It simply was so, and that it was so grew to be known. Was she blamed? No! And Olivier? no more than she. It was a very common case, and as no one adverted to the fact that it was attributable to the institution of marriage upon

the limited liability system—marriage without love—no one did aught save speculate upon what were to be Claire's compensations in life.

Was she to be one of those wives—so common in France—whose austere lives are built upon the renouncement of every joy; and who too often entail upon the children, to whom they sacrifice everything, the gloom of an entire existence void of love?

If so, it would be a pity. Claire was too beautiful for that; too womanly! That impressed all men.

"She is so womanly!" would they say, "so irresistible in her sweet, wifely beauty!" and then they pitied and poetised her, and came to speak of her in a way that was unfamiliar to Victor. And he, too, grew to pity her, and to think of her as he had never been wont to do, and yet was totally unsuspecting of any danger.

Claire's conduct on the one hand was so perfect in her every deed, thought, word, or look, breathed such all but holy purity—and, on the other hand, Olivier was so inferior to her in every sense, that M. de Lancour soon ceased to admonish his cousin upon the duty of loving her husband. He had not the heart to do it, but with this change in his bearing towards her came another. He allowed himself to think of her as unhappy, and he unconsciously grew to suffer with his cousin Claire.

There might be danger at hand, but neither divined it. Claire was schooling herself to resignation, to the task of giving up all life's gladsome brightness—all

the consolation even of thinking that, had circumstances been different, Victor would have asked her for his wife—for had he not said he thought ill of marriages between cousins? Claire was trying to obliterate even the innocent sweet dreams of the past; and Victor was grieved—and for ever busy with his grief—that she whom he loved so tenderly should be doomed to lead a life so dull, so colourless, and so stale.

That was all. And so the days wore on.

In the very beginning of October there was to be an agricultural meeting at Combeville. Brunoy and Malleray had had each their fête, and the last distribution of prizes was to take place at Combeville. It was to be rather a solemn affair, for this part of the province, lying nearer towards La Beauce, was the most purely agricultural district of all, and laid claims to respect, in the way of mangel wurzel, cart-horses, and pigs. There had been, on the side of the great proprietors, several successful attempts at improving the equine race, and M. de Clavreuil and Henri Dupont had both, upon one occasion, sent up to Paris, to a cattle show, a team or two of regenerated *Percherons* that won the suffrages of all connoisseurs. There were some adventurous spirits who had tried sheep; but, as a general rule, mutton was said not to pay, and horses and pigs remained in the ascendant—the former really justifying this perseverance, the latter decidedly bad, but filling the souls of their breeders with satisfaction. They delighted in their long-legged, large-eared, flabby-flanked pigs. Horned cattle came mostly from the

opposite extremity of the department, and several prized animals were sent from Malleray and Brunoy to grace the fête held in honour of the people of Combeville. In a large field preceding the entrance to the town, booths and stalls were erected as for a fair; and, to say the truth, there was, in fact, a fair as well as an agricultural show, and all the savages, and wild beasts, and learned dogs, and strolling players for fifty miles round had assembled there, in order to convert the townsfolk of Combeville into their especial rate-payers.

The weather being splendid, and the department unusually full of visitors, it was foretold that the *concours régional*, as it was termed, would be more than usually brilliant.

It was early in the day when two or three carriages, filled with the guests staying at the château, left Clavreuil. M. de Lancour was not of the number; he, and in general the inhabitants of Tours, profited by a part of the railway, and went direct. The Clavreuil party were, besides the Count and Countess and Claire and Madame Beaudouin, a family of cousins from the south, and five or six stray men, sportsmen whose mission it was to kill other men's game, and who did so to their heart's content.

Claire did the honours of her calèche to her Languedocian cousins, husband and wife, and gave the fourth place to an *ex-chef d'escadron* of cuirassiers, who had retired from service on account of his numerous wounds, and lived universally respected in the neighbourhood. The conversation happening to fall upon

M. de Lancour, the commandant became irrepressible—it was a favourite theme—and launched forth, for the benefit of the dark-eyed southern lady opposite to him, into recitals of the deeds of valour he had seen Victor perform in the Italian campaign of 1859. He could not conceive how he escaped with life from Magenta, where he received the cross upon the battlefield; and as to Solferino, why he believed him to have withstood single-handed the attack of a whole troop of Jägers! To be sure he was so severely wounded there that no one in the army believed he could ever recover.

Such things, opined the commandant, when you happened to witness them, did make you curious about a man's destiny. The commandant was a bit of an philosopher.

"I often wonder," he said, "what Lancour's eventual fate will be; when you see a man saved from such all but inevitable destruction you can't help thinking he's saved for some purpose—but what?"

And Claire listened to it all in silence, and dreamily wondered, too, within herself, for what fate, sad or glorious, her cousin Victor was saved.

They reached the ground and alighted, and, dividing into groups of threes and fours, proceeded to visit the various booths and stalls, and agreed to make a general trysting-place of a knoll at one end of the field, whereon the Duc de Vivienne had established a large tent with a magnificent luncheon, and whence it

was perfectly possible to see the races, which were the chief attraction of all.

Claire, with her usual kindness, gave herself up to the task of amusing her southern relative, to whom all about him was strange. She took him from stall to stall, above all among the vegetables, showing him pumpkins as big as Memnon's head, carrots and beet-roots of the size of a giant's thigh, monstrous melons, and peaches overgrown; ("All water and no sun!" as he observed contemptuously, reverting to the small, savoury, heat-cracked fruit of his own baking south.)

Then she took him to see the *Percherons*, and the pigs, and the live-stock generally, and when she had done her duty thoroughly, and shown him nearly everything, she found she was separated from all her party, and on the wrong side of the field.

This was called so by the people of Claire's set, simply because it was appropriated to the sightseers of the official world. The Mayor and municipality of Combeville had erected a grand stand, whence a comprehensive view was obtained of the whole field beneath; and into the central compartment of this stand were to be introduced all the high officials of the county. There were three compartments, one in the centre, which projected beyond the other two, and two wings. The central seats were evidently the grand ones, for they were covered with red velvet, and upon all the hangings of this part of the edifice there were gold fringes and tassels. Here were to be seated the prefect, and the sub-prefects, and the Mayor, and the general

and municipal councillors, and all the local grandees, and their families.

In the two side tribunes there was a trifle less splendour; no gold at all, and hangings of red stuff instead of velvet. The chairs, too, and benches, were hard, and straw or cane-bottomed. These tribunes were for the public.

While the young Marquise was reconnoitring her position, and the possibilities of regaining the Mont-Vivienne tent, the sub-prefect of Brunoy came up to her, and, volunteering his services, besought her to take refuge in the official stand, close to which she was then standing. He offered her a front seat, worthy man! and suggested, not without some timidity, how charmed Madame the Prefectess would be to extend to her the hospitality of the tribune.

Claire was embarrassed, for she recoiled from hurting any one, and yet she felt that her father would never tolerate her being the guest of the chief government authority of the place. Her Languedocian cousin, so far from helping her, voted noisily for acceptance of the well-meant offer.

Was there no means of crossing the field? None? The crowd was immense, the gendarmes had begun to clear the course, and from the town side the dust of a long string of carriages was perceived.

"There is Monsieur the Prefect!" exclaimed the Brunoy functionary; "you have not a moment to lose, Madame la Marquise, or you will be crushed by the

crowd; let me entreat of you to accept my arm—pray allow me——”

But Claire had bethought her of a compromise: she could not avoid placing herself in the official stand, but she would do so quietly, and preserving as it were a kind of incognito. In spite, therefore, of all the endeavours of the sub-prefect, and all the murmurs of the Languedocian relative, she achieved what she desired, namely, a seat on the second row of the benches in the left hand wing of the stand. There she felt herself very comfortably situated, and thanked the sub-prefect of Brunoy for his attention, as he took his leave to go and fill his more exalted position in the velvet draperied centre.

The tribune was unusually high, and the seats, when reached, placed you upon the level of any lofty first-floor in a Paris house. The stairs by which you attained to them were roughly put together, and denoted haste. A few moments after Claire had taken her seat the rush into the tribune began. The authorities were to have enjoyed precedence of everyone, but not all the efforts or loud threats of the gendarmes could obtain this; and prefect and prefectess, and all the uniformed male dignitaries, and all the overdressed female ones, tumbled in pell mell with their less mighty fellow creatures. The throng of people was tremendous, and you might feel the boards vibrate and tremble under you, as billow after billow of the crowd came surging up.

As many ladies came into the part of the stand

where Claire sat, she induced her companion to make way for them by retreating to the back seats, nearer to the door. He did not like this at first, but he obeyed, and was apparently very soon rewarded for it by the pleasures of an animated conversation with his neighbours, to whom Claire heard him loudly imparting his satisfaction at being so high up.

"You have a thousand times better view than from that tent of theirs yonder!" he declared unceremoniously.

The neighbour, however, shook his head, and said they had built the stand a great deal too high.

The young Marquise looked round, and here and there caught sight of a familiar face, and exchanged greetings with an acquaintance.

From the left wing, where she was sitting, you could see across, between the poles which supported the festoons over the prefect's seats, into the right wing.

There, there were many strangers, a few of the younger officers of M. de Lancour's regiment, and several Englishmen; and then a face caught her eye, and her heart beat. It was a face she had not seen for many months,—not seen since Good Friday, and as she gazed upon it (and she could not help gazing!) the dirge of the *Stabat Mater* seemed to ring again through her brain.

* She could not detach her gaze, I repeat. Berthe de Mottefort, it seemed to her, had not improved since the day she saw her last. She was not better looking;

but she looked more anxious. She was, as ever, excellently well-dressed, with that air of severe grace, and that attention to severe colouring, that become her who has only external propriety left her to observe.

Claire now felt she must cease to look, for an instinct told her that if she looked longer, her gaze would be answered, and she would not meet Berthe's eye. She averted her glance, sent it wandering over nearer objects, and all at once encountered Victor's.

M. de Lancour was standing at the back of the central tribune, a whole deep range of seats behind the prefect's arm-chair.

Claire's eye rested on Victor's, and both so instantaneously and so thoroughly felt what was passing in each other's mind, that neither bowed nor made any attempt at bowing; they looked for one second straight into each other's soul, and then Victor, with a pained expression, looked down; Claire, blushing scarlet, looked away. M. de Lancour felt that Claire had judged Berthe, and Claire felt that Victor knew she had done so.

A signal was given, and the prefect rose to make a speech; but the tribune was far too high, no one heard him. Then other speeches followed, and then music from bands stationed beneath; then a list of names was read, the names of those who had got prizes, and in these various ceremonies a period of two hours went by.

And still the crowd mounted, and set gendarmes at

nought, and thronged the ill-made stairs, and pushed and pressed to gain admittance.

All at once, there was a pause, and then a bell rang. At last! there were the races, and that was followed by one of those mysterious movements that are peculiar to thick throngs.

The human sea heaved as with a ground swell, breathed as from one chest, as the sea does; was, as it were, all one, and rolled, cumbrously disportive, in its contentment.

The movement was accompanied by an odd cracking sound. Very slight. Then the bell rang for starting:—then!—what was that?

Was it a cry? a roar? a crash? all that; yet nothing of that—other than that: a dim sense of something horrible; a vision, a nightmare, a convulsion; perhaps, who knows, an earthquake?

There was a jar, a wrench, a break, and crackings, and upliftings, and splittings, as in a rock-struck ship; a wild din of mingled voices; a wild jostle of human bodies jumbled together in heaps; a pavement of upturned faces, ghastly with dread; a giddy whirl, as of the fall from a balloon—chaotic confusion, so that men knew not whether all around them reeled, or whether their own brain was reeling.

The great stand had given way, and some two or three hundred people were being hurled, from a height of four or five-and-twenty feet, to the ground.

Some threw themselves deliriously down from the front seats, and were maimed, killed, or caught by the

crowd below; some clutched at their neighbours, some clung to poles or planks for support. The worst accidents happened at the back of the tribune, for the many had thrown themselves with one rush towards the staircase which had first given way.

Claire had risen to her feet instinctively with the rest, upon the first alarm; but without understanding what was passing. When she understood, one feeling predominated in her over all, and she looked at Victor.

He had no thought for her, at that hour, or for any special one; he had thought only for all, and for his duty in trying to be of use to all. He had so placed himself as to keep momentarily an issue free at the back of the central compartment of the tribune; for, poised upon some not yet fallen woodwork, and with his right arm holding firm to a pole that had withstood the shock, M. de Lancour bore upon his shoulders and the back of his head and neck, the whole weight of the lower portion of the roofing, which he thus prevented from crushing the struggling people who were writhing and shrieking round him. This could only endure a few minutes, for the rest of the fabric was tottering; and every nail that loosened itself brought perdition. Behind him was space.

Claire looked at Victor, not merely fearless, but inspired with one grand, sweet purpose. A man may be lion-hearted and yet quail before such a scene as this: how much more then a woman! But one loving

thought mastered Claire now, and raised her above the consciousness of danger.

She might die with him!

That it was inspired her.

And then, as it is related of drowning men that they see even into the minutest incident of their lives in one brief second, Claire suddenly saw her empty, lonely past peopled with shadows only, and where burned but one light—her hopeless love.

A violent scream, followed by sharp, angry cries, and repeated shrieks of "Victor! Victor!" sounded, as it seemed, close to her ear, and she blushed in her inmost soul for the cowardly heart that could not meet death proudly, dying by his side. How much better she, Claire, loved him than did this woman!

No one in the terror-stricken crowd heeded these screams, or heard them. Claire heard them, and saw Berthe de Mottefort's panic-marked face as she struggled in the midst of the falling throng.

The scaffolding of the left-hand wing, where Claire had been seated, had not yet given way; so that, by leaning against the pole in the corner of that compartment, she might still maintain her equilibrium, and give time for some contrivance from below to save her.

But Claire's thoughts were not fixed on safety; they were all for him whom she had loved—she never knew how much till the near approaching infinite of death taught her her own kindred infinite of love.

It came back upon her, now, what the commandant

had said; and she saw Victor glory-crowned at Magenta and bleeding at Solferino. Saved! Saved for what? Why for this, to be sure—for her!

Judge her not, mothers of children, whose fathers have been your first love.

She thought not then of her baby, smiling rosily, in her own girlhood's home—she thought of the imagined happiness that had been denied her.

It was not love that beckoned her on, but love in death. The strong holy purity of a death-marked love.

Victor did not love her; would, living, never love her. His love was for the craven-hearted woman who, in her greed of life, cast his name ignobly to the crowd; his love was for her who was unworthy of him. But death was so solemn, so sanctifying, that in the hour of parting with life, he might know how he had been loved.

All this whirl of conflicting thoughts tore, whirlwind-like, through Claire's brain in a few short seconds.

Victor was still at his perilous post, warding off destruction, for an instant, from the poor agonized creatures that sought to escape; but boards cracked, planks yielded, and the roof was crushing him more and more. His footing too was unstable, and must give way. There were cries for ropes and ladders from beneath, but no one seized their purport. And where were ladders; or where were ropes?

There was no hope. Whoever might be saved, Victor would be crushed to death inevitably.

Inevitable? yes. There lay the sanction—death: therein lay the charm, the hope, the certainty of union.

The Moment, divine in its impalpable, invincible power—the Moment which prompted Antony's immortal shame at Actium, and has inspired all acts of unlimited devotion—the Moment sent its resistless revelation to Claire's heart, and her resolve was taken.

How she over-stepped that space, she knew not; there were masses of rubbish heaped up between Victor and herself: boards, benches, rent draperies, torn dresses, and, in one place, a large yawning space, through which it was difficult not to fall. But she neither fell nor stumbled; it almost seemed to herself as though she had wings and flew.

Just as a fresh sound of demolition was heard, and a loud cry of wail and horror rose up from below, Claire, all obstacles over-stepped, reached the same unsteady footing upon which Victor was maintaining himself, and, flushed with her own ardent purpose, forgetful of all save her one aim, reached her cousin's side, and with her hand seizing his, breathed softly only the words,—

“Here I am.”

It was too late.

With one tremendous crash, the remainder of what had been the grand stand fell in, and, for several minutes, only a thick cloud of dust was visible.

CHAPTER XII.

True Love.

NEITHER Claire nor M. de Lancour were killed.

It is as difficult to comprehend how, in disasters where death seems impending upon all, any can escape, as it is hard to understand death being the result of some accident so slight that it scarcely seems sufficient for the extinction of a fly. Yet both things happen every day. Life is outweighed by a feather's weight, and withstands the blowing up of a city; men are vanquished by a scratch, by a breath of wind, by an emotion, and emerge scathless from some destructive combination tremendous enough to have crushed them to shapeless atoms. One is as unaccountable as the other, and utterly deranges the petty calculations of our sapience. So do many thousand circumstances we heed not in this, the perpetual miracle, called life.

M. de Lancour and the young Marquise were saved, neither knew how, for it was next to impossible to explain why they were not killed.

The superstitious, self-called devout, ascribed everything to the virtue of a certain relic worn by Claire; others said that M. de Lancour's disinterestedness had saved him, for that, in so generously devoting himself to preserve those around him he had, involuntarily,

preserved himself. It is true that, when the operation of extracting the bodies of the fallen had begun, M. de Lancour and the young Marquise were found not insensible, but stunned, and protected by a cavity formed by two rafters, which had struck against each other and made a kind of angle above their heads. Around them were people severely wounded, beneath them were the dying and the dead. The accident had been a frightful one, and cast a gloom over the entire department. As far as material harm went, Claire was severely bruised, and had sprained her left arm. Victor, besides strains and contusions, had received a cut over the head, of all which he thought little enough. Physically speaking this was all, and it was assuredly not much.

But morally?

Morally, a great knowledge had dawned upon Victor—he was loved. Loved by the loveliest and purest of her sex. Loved with a love so strong, that it had welcomed death; with a love whose strength was matched by its infinite purity; loved by Claire, whom he must never see again.

Why? was it only because Claire loved him that they could meet no more? no! it was because he loved her, and that each knew now the secret of the other's love; and Victor, being not only honourable but honest, knew that this feeling could not be trifled with, and, to be kept holy, must be indulged in from afar.

There is nothing so false as to represent young gentlemen falling irremediably in love with young

ladies whom they rescue from some great danger. The man who saves a woman he does not already love from some terrible fate is not brought nearer to loving her by that act. He has merely, in obedience to some high sense of duty, or some generous impulse, grandly asserted himself. If he be in love with her already it is another matter.

But Victor was not in love with his cousin Claire, nor had he even specially thought of saving her upon the occasion in question. He had, as a man ought to do in such cases, thought of his duty only, and done what his duty required; namely, proved himself at the moment of the largest use to the largest number. His duty assumed no individual form. He saw only the threatened human creatures round him, and did his utmost to save them, unmindful of any particular one as of himself.

It was when reflection came, and the distinct memory of details, that Victor recognised what the truth really was. It was not at first. The first impression was one of horror and of awe; of solemn recognition of the mighty power which sets all human combinations at nought, and of pity for the poor pleasure-seekers who had seen their hour of harmless enjoyment turned into one of wailing. When general suffering and sorrow are around him, no man, worthy of the name, reverts to himself, but merges himself into his kind, and feels collectively. Take a man to the verge of death, let him feel the chill breath of the destroyer on his cheek, and he will come back cured

of many things which he took into serious account before. It is only the firmly-rooted growths, the rock-plants of his soul, that withstand these shocks: the seedlings are scattered to the winds.

At first, then, M. de Lancour did not revert to himself or to his own personal sensations: he did all the good he could, and when that was done he returned to Tours with the other officers of his regiment, one of whom was far more seriously hurt than himself.

He had acted: when action was over he began to think, and from memory and thought combined sprang the dream of what he knew. And then with consciousness came joy. Yes! Victor's first feeling upon recognising the truth, was a deep heart-filling joy—the joy that thrills through every noble nature when it receives the one great gift, the gift of a human soul.

And that gift he could not accept. He had accepted the donation of a lesser love, but this one he must renounce. Renouncement had become the law of his being now. He must not dare to love Claire; not only because she was not free in honour to love him, but because he was not free in honour to love her. He had bound himself to another, whose so-called sacrifice he had not rejected. And then he plunged into the past, dived down to its utmost depths, and saw that which lay beneath the surface and shuddered at the levity with which honour, purity, integrity, all that should be held most precious, had been

abandoned. Seen by the light of Claire's thoroughness and simplicity of character, what was Berthe de Mottefort? Victor shrank from the question, for he could not but judge Berthe, and he had no right to judge her. She said she had sacrificed herself for him! Was this true? No! she had merely sacrificed duty to inclination—to an inclination which, because she was weak, she had called irresistible. Claire who, while they both lived, would never permit him so much as an impure thought about her,—Claire, to share death with him, came serenely dauntless to his side, whilst she, who had trampled on her own fair fame for love of him, fled shrieking from the danger to which he remained exposed.

This merely brought confirmation to his mind of that which he had long laboured not to admit; namely of Berthe's moral inferiority. Berthe was unworthy, but that regarded him not. She was unworthy of the surrender of a man's whole life, but in her unworthiness lay the lesson. Where would have been the penalty had she been worthy? had she, whose fault he had shared, brought him peace and satisfaction, what would have been the payment exacted from him for infringing laws human and divine? It was as compared to Claire that Berthe sank to so low a level, but had he not lost his privilege of communion with the lofty and the pure? What was his right to the commerce of angels, he who had worshipped at the shrines of the idols of clay?

And this was the real hardship: this the true

punishment for the evil done. It was not alone that Claire was denied to his thoughts, it was that his thoughts were condemned to centre in another. He was not released from the old bondage. It endured and would endure; and, however he might avow his error to himself, the consequences of the error must subsist, and he must honestly pay with all his protecting care and devotion the fatal present made him by a woman who had lightly thrown herself away!

Victor did not for a moment seek to elude his self-incurred responsibility; he was, as I have said, inflexibly honest, and whatever might be the cost would in no circumstance of life leave a pledge unredeemed. But he suffered severely, and saw for the first time in their real forms so many things which, in the life of the world, come to us in disguise, and are accepted for other than they are.

There was nothing serious, as we stated before, in the hurts received by M. de Lancour at the fall of the grand stand at Combeville, but there was enough to produce temporary illness. The depression of a rib, unnoticed for a day or two, induced an attack of intercostal neuralgia, as the physician termed it, and brought on neuralgic fever, so severe as to confine Victor to his bed for several days.

For the pain he cared little, but in the seclusion he rejoiced; and for the first time in his life made the most of an illness in order to secure solitude.

Madame de Mottefort had escaped from the Combeville catastrophe with nothing save a few scratches and

sundry damages to her dress, but she lived in a very retired manner at Tours, and no one as yet knew her by sight. It was vaguely known that M. de Lancour had some illicit connection with another man's wife, but no particulars had transpired, and Berthe would not have committed the indecorum of going in person even to Victor's door to inquire after him.

Solitude he did then in reality secure to himself for a whole fortnight, and during that time he thought out many a moral problem, and laid down for himself some of the few principles he was yet in time to hold by.

At last, one morning after reading the *Moniteur*, he suddenly rang for his servant, ordered him to pack up his valise, wrote a short note to his colonel, another to Madame de Mottefort, and took the afternoon train up to Paris, looking as though some extraordinary piece of luck had lightened him of half his cares at once.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Farewell.

AND how had it been with Claire?

Well, and calmly to all appearance. Her chief occupation had been that of striving to help and comfort the families of those who had most suffered in the accident at Combeville; and in this she was mainly aided by Madame Beaudouin. These two, setting at nought all distinctions of opinion and all petty divisions of class or coterie, went, as Christian women should, from house to house, their hearts full of tender zeal and genuine sympathy, to see what succour or consolation could be afforded to the afflicted. It was not quite such plain sailing as you might fancy, for the persons concerned were far more susceptible, and far less easy of approach than the so-called poor. These were nearly all people belonging to the well-to-do middle-classes, rich tradesfolk, employés, and small government functionaries, people who resent far more indignantly the notion of a condescension than that of an injury. Yet Claire and Madame Beaudouin seemed to possess the secret of winning their way, for on all sides they were sincerely welcomed, and grateful hearts responded to the truth of the kindness offered to them.

Madame de Clavreuil could not understand how they

managed it, and she imparted to the ladies of her own set that it seemed quite a gift in the young Marquise to be able to go about among people who were not of her own condition and leave upon them a pleasant impression.

"I never know what to say to them," said the worthy Countess.

"Besides which," responded the lady to whom she addressed the above remark,—*"they contrive to be affronted by whatever you do say."*

However, thus it was not with Claire, and she and Aunt Clémentine gained real friends and well-wishers wherever they went.

But the effect produced by the Combeville catastrophe wore off, as such things eventually do, even in small provincial centres, and there was no more cause for Claire's activity.

How would it be with her when she had nothing more to do? What would her own heart say to her when she came to be thrown back upon its communings?

That moment came, and Claire remained unaltered. Serenely cheerful, and free, as it seemed, from all perturbation of spirit, she was more affectionate with her mother than she had ever been since her marriage; to her husband she showed marked kindness; of her child she grew passionately fond, and perhaps in her piety there was more fervour than heretofore; but above all else a deep calm seemed to spread itself over Claire.

Three weeks had elapsed, and M. de Lancour had never returned to Clavreuil. News of him were re-

ceived daily at the château, for Count René, besides frequently going over to Tours to speak to the physician who was attending his nephew, had established regular communications with Victor's *brosseur*, a very devoted servant who had accompanied his master in all his campaigns. M. de Clavreuil was dimly convinced, though he could not exactly make out why, that Claire owed her life to Victor; that the latter was much more hurt than he admitted, and the gratitude he conceived thereat was so lively that he abjured at once all the repugnance treasured up for long years by all around him for the name of Lancour, and was incessantly talking of Victor, and of the admiration with which his African nephew had suddenly inspired him.

At last, all doubts as to M. de Lancour's complete recovery were brought to an end, for his sudden departure for Paris was announced one day at dinner by the Count, who merely added that he wished he could have found time to come and shake hands with them before starting.

"He's had enough of being moped up in a sick room, and in country quarters; I dare say he counted the minutes till he could shake himself out a little on the pavement of Paris," said a country neighbour, whose idea of Paradise was the capital, where he never went, and of the other extreme, the province, where he was condemned to live.

Between Aunt Clémentine and her niece Victor's name had never once been mentioned since the day when Claire appealed to Madame Beaudouin to try and

protect her against the necessity of a marriage with Olivier.

And so the days went by, and the following week was to see the young Marquise re-established till the close of the year, in the home which was hers now, but which, do what she would, she could not look upon familiarly.

The Vivienne marriage had taken place, and the young couple, absent on their honeymoon trip, were to return at the end of the month, and Mont-Vivienne and Beauvoisin were (it had been agreed) to be the headquarters of all the gay doings of the department. Claire would have in good earnest now to discharge her duties as mistress of a large household, and donor of magnificent entertainments, for therein lay not the ambition of her mother-in-law.

The Dowager liked to govern people, but did not care to amuse them; she domineered in a severely practical, business-like sort of manner, loved her own way, and tried to force everybody about her to shape their lives accordingly that way; but she was neither cultivated nor elegant-minded enough to enter into what, in France, is the work of receiving upon a grand scale. All this would fall to the share of the young Marquise, and, from All Saints to the middle of January, she must be for ever in the midst of a crowd—an intimate crowd, more irksome far than the anonymous one that constitutes the great world of Paris, and her constant companions would be that bridegroom and bride whose

names were for ever identified with M. de Lancour's declaration of his dislike of marriages between cousins!

Well, the memory of this declaration that had so hurt her at the time had lost all bitterness now for Claire; and in the harmonies which resounded through her soul, there was apparently no jarring note.

Claire would often now pass long hours alone in that room of hers in her own old home, and had you looked at her then, you would have seen that, absorbed in some fair, sweet vision, she was miles and miles away from the livings and rubbings, and disappointments and crosses of this everyday life of ours.

She was seated in one of these seemingly peaceful day dreams of hers, one afternoon towards the end of October. It had rained heavily in the morning, and it was only as the sun journeyed towards the west that he shone forth in golden rays, determined as it were, before he set, to console vexed Nature kindly.

Claire sat at her window, looking out at so many familiar objects which, strange to say, seemed immeasurably distant now, for they came not within her dream, which tended heavenwards; she watched the wet boughs that, at every breath of wind, shook out bright showers, turned by the sunlight into drops of gold, and listened mechanically to the twitterings of birds who, from their leafy coverts, chirped feebly to each other, that they had outlived the storm. All earth seemed resting after agitation: so, too, was Claire, and like all idealistic natures, she had, in this new phase of her heart's life, a deep, though unconscious delight in finding in the

outward aspects of Nature, a kind of echo to the vibrations of her own innermost being.

A knock came at her door, and, a moment after, Madame Beaudouin entered.

There was a certain air of hesitation about her, and she did not speak at once; but looked earnestly at her niece.

The young Marquise rose, and laying her hand upon the hand of Madame Beaudouin, replied to her look with one so eloquent, that plainly between these two women no words were requisite.

"Your cousin, Victor," began Aunt Clémentine, still with a slight trace of embarrassment——

"I knew he would come," interrupted Claire, very quietly, and without the smallest sign of flutter or of joy. "I have been waiting for him, for many days past. Is he gone? or is he still there?"

"He is there, darling," rejoined Madame Beaudouin; but still as though there were something she did not like to tell.

"Does he wish to see me?" asked Claire, in the same calm tone.

"Yes, dearest," said her aunt; "he has come on purpose to see you."

"Where is he?"

"In what used to be your atelier, beyond the great dining-room, where no one ever goes, for——" and Madame Beaudouin hesitated more and more; "for he desires to speak with you alone." She uttered the concluding words in a low tone.

"It is also my wish," said Claire, as she passed onwards towards the door. Before she had quite reached it.

"My child! my darling!" murmured Madame Beaudouin, suddenly straining her niece in a close embrace, and gazing at her with eyes overflowing with tears.

"All is as it should be, aunt, dear," responded Claire, gently disengaging herself from Madame Beaudouin's arms, and printing upon her forehead a tender, loving kiss. "All have their trials and must bear them, but I am very happy."

The voice that spoke these words was steady with the weight of the truth it bore, and the whole aspect of the speaker was one of calm, sweet, serenity; but oh! so grave.

The young Marquise went to seek her cousin Victor, and found him in the little scantily furnished turret room, which had been her study when she was a girl. Unfinished pictures of hers hung yet upon the walls, and a ray of sun, struggling through the vine leaves that grew around the rarely-opened window, fell upon her easel, in the very place where she had left it when she bade adieu to her father's house.

The cousins were alone.

Victor was standing at the window, looking out over the little wooden bridge over the moat, which no one ever crossed, because it was reported unsafe. He turned round when the door opened, and advanced to meet Claire.

She could not but see how very much he was altered, and what traces were left upon his countenance by mental strife and pain.

For a few seconds both were silent, and merely looked into each other's faces. Was there indeed any need of words? had not both one purpose, both one faith?

Yes! but in the oneness of that love, how you might have marked the difference of loving between the woman and the man! he was tortured, she was calm; he had achieved victory, but had fought hardly for it, whilst to her the consciousness of being loved was so sufficing, that as yet she knew of no victory to fight for, she had gained everything, and felt most for his suffering.

"I have come to say good-bye," said Victor, at last.

"I knew you would come; I have been expecting you," answered softly Claire.

"I have come to say good-bye," repeated Victor.

"You do rightly," replied the young Marquise, in a more subdued tone; and, after an imperceptible pause, "you do rightly, as you always do," she added slowly, and looking at him with tender approbation, "where is it you are going?"

"To Africa," he rejoined.

Claire's heart gave one bound, and she turned pale.

"It is not a change of garrison," remarked quickly M. de Lancour, who instantly divined the cause of her

agitation, "it is an expedition against the Kabyles that I have asked leave to join. I go quite alone, not even one of my comrades accompanies me."

A flush replaced the pallor on Claire's features.

"Do you leave soon?" she inquired.

"To-night," he replied.

"To-night?" she repeated.

"I leave Tours to-night and Paris to-morrow night."

"Who commands the expedition?"

"MacMahon."

And then again there was silence, and they looked into each other's faces; looked tenderly, firmly, looked all they felt. But what more was there to say? This was no case for loud assurances; no case for promising to love; this was the love itself paid down. They were dealing with stern facts; and the very quality of their love made them deal rigidly with them.

What was there more to say?

She did not bid him be careful of his life, nor did he beseech her to preserve his memory—for she knew he was brave, and he knew she was true; and both were Christians mindful of their duty to God.

Silence endured between them for many minutes still, if that indeed was silence in which soul so ardently communed with soul.

And then six o'clock striking from the clock of the château reminded M. de Lancour that his time was limited.

"Good-bye then, now," he said, in a very low voice, and preparing to depart.

"Good-bye," she echoed.

Not one expression of endearment had passed their lips, they had not called each other by their names, nor had they even shaken hands, when, in the extreme of this their solemn severance, Claire held out hers to M. de Lancour.

He took and held it one instant firmly in his grasp, then slowly bending down and imprinting upon it reverently one kiss,—

"God in heaven bless you, my own dear cousin Claire!" was all he uttered, and then he left her.

Claire answered not in words, but with a look, and the look rested still on the place where Victor had stood, long after that place was empty.

And thus the cousins parted.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Sinner seeks the Saint.

THE week following M. de Lancour's departure for Algeria, Claire returned to Beauvoisin with Olivier, Madame Beaudouin repaired for the autumn months to a château her husband had left her between Bordeaux and Bayonne, and M. and Madame de Clavreuil buried themselves up to the ears in the hopeless monotony of country life in France (when it is monotonous), he shooting—she embroidering, till custom would call them again up to Paris.

They had deeply regretted not having seen Victor before he started, but they had only themselves to blame; he had come, they were out, Claire and Madame Beaudouin had both seen him, and received his parting words, and therewith all was ended. To be sure, it was a most extraordinary freak of his to have gone off so suddenly, but he was so ambitious, and so restless, and so madly attached to his profession, that, after all, no freak of this kind was, perhaps, to be wondered at on his part.

The three months' festivities at Beauvoisin were surmounted by the young Marquise with singular ease, and the whole county agreed that so perfect a mistress of a house had never been seen. Forgetting nothing,

overlooking no one, equally gracious to all, calmly cheerful and never tired, Claire was, at the close of the season, held up by the elders as a pattern to her own generation. The Duc de Vivienne said she reminded him of his maternal grandmother, the Princesse de Nogent-Valnoix, whom he remembered when he was a child; and M. de Moranges declared that she was the last *grande dame* France would ever see.

"She is so quietly self-possessed," was invariably the phrase with which he wound up his praises of his niece.

"Because she has no nerves," was the objection sometimes raised by those of her own sex who, though they all admired and even liked her, avowed that they did not altogether understand her. They mostly accused her of indifference, and they were, maybe, not thoroughly in the wrong.

Claire was in that stage of her inner life where one idea absorbs everything, and, free from all reproach, she gave up her heart and soul to that idea to feed upon. Her entire external self she devoted to others, but without a shade of preference, being the same to all.

You must take with you that Claire's dream from childhood upwards had been her cousin Victor; and that, right or wrong, her real misery had sprung from the thought that she could never be anything to him. And now she was everything! Pure as she was, how could she be other than enraptured? This was the ideal, romantic love she had pictured to herself throughout

her youth—the love of the young Condé for Marthe du Vigean, the love that such noble spirits as Marie de Hautefort would sanction and might feel—the love heroical, ecstatic, if you will; exaggerated and unnatural, many readers will perhaps exclaim; but nevertheless, the love that inspired the entire age of chivalry all over the world, and that, let it not be forgotten, was for centuries the ideal of French women of a certain condition.

Separation was not for Claire what it was for M. de Lancour, for she had obtained now all she desired; she had no desire beyond. In the glorious assurance of Victor's love lay her whole conquest, and she perceived nothing of what failed her.

There was, in fact, no separation for Claire. Victor was for ever by her side, as she felt convinced she was by his. Nothing could ever divide them, though on earth they might meet no more.

Here was the secret of Claire's tranquillity and self-possession. She was, in fact, possessed by one thought, wrapt in her dream, and saw everything around her from a distance.

Olivier had apparently quite outlived the unpleasantness of the election, and was on the best terms with all his neighbours. He set up a pack of hounds in imitation of Gaston de Vivienne, and (the forest lands of the department lying wholly in these districts) these two packs did considerable mischief among the boars and stags. Olivier's enjoyment in all this was only now and then interrupted by a journey of two or

three days to Paris, no one knew why, but he mentioned urgent business, and no one noticed that these absences invariably coincided with the arrival at Brunoy of the Marquis de Moranges.

At Christmas there was still open house at Beauvoisin, and there were private theatricals at Mont-Vivienne.

M. de Moranges had returned to Paris. One bright frosty day, as he was getting out of his brougham, in the Rue de la Paix, the Marquis met Madame Beaudouin.

"You here, at this season!" The same words were uttered by both.

"My being here has nothing surprising," said Madame Beaudouin, as she smilingly held out her hand; "I am a hermit. There are no dead seasons for me; for the world and I have long ceased to take each other into account. But you, one of the Kings of Fashion, in Paris in December, that is an astonishing circumstance!"

"Where is one to go to?" rejoined M. de Moranges. "I do not enjoy the country in winter; yet I confess to being lonely in town: however, for that matter, one is lonely everywhere."

Madame Beaudouin was struck by the despondent tone in which M. de Moranges spoke; and, as she looked steadfastly at him, she saw how great was the change in his appearance.

You could not say of him that he looked his age, for he had always done that—as a healthy, well-con-

stituted man should do; but, whereas he had hitherto carried his years lightly, bravely, his years now seemed to be pressing down upon him heavily.

Madame Beaudouin had heard it remarked at Clavreuil that the magnificent Marquis was much altered, but the truth of the remark had not struck her then; it did strike her now. M. de Moranges' features were care-worn, and bore traces of pain and anxiety.

Aunt Clémentine's sympathy for all living creatures was such, and her conception of human weakness so unbounded, that she never stopped to inquire what he was who suffered, but how his suffering might be assuaged.

"If such a dull fireside as mine could seem pleasant to you," she said, "there is a seat for you there at all times. I never go out of an evening."

The Marquis brightened up at these words, and the sweet, frank simplicity with which they were uttered, seemed to warm him.

"Are you in earnest?" he asked. "May I really come sometimes?"

"I am always in earnest," was her reply. "You may come at all times; you will always be welcome."

And M. de Moranges did go frequently to sit by Madame Beaudouin's fireside, and her sympathy being genuine, he invariably went comforted away.

One evening, he had remained later and talked less than usual, and the care that sat upon him appeared more than habitually oppressive.

After a long pause, during which M. de Moranges had constructed many a dainty edifice between the logs of wood, and then gazed at them intently,—

“If I were sure you would not be angry with me,” he began, “and not regard as an impertinence what I might have to say, I would——”

Madame Beaudouin interrupted him,—

“I am never angry,” she observed; “and you cannot say anything I ought to object to hear.”

“Well then,” he retorted, “forgive the bluntness of my words: you are the only woman I could have married. You are not angry with me?”

She looked at him with her usual air of compassionate kindness,—

“Why should I be so?” she answered; “it is a great compliment you pay me.”

“It is so,” said M. de Moranges, gravely; “and so I meant it: but then, you know, I am such a sinner that any save the superior woman you are would——”

“Hush!” rejoined she; “there are no sinners, and no superiors. You exaggerate both the good and the evil. We are all, in the end, very much alike. Some are weaker than others, and, therefore, more to be pitied; that is all. Very much more to be pitied,” she added, slowly and impressively.

“And you?” inquired the Marquis, involuntarily.

“I?” echoed Aunt Clémentine, with irrepressible emotion, “I have to thank God for His mercies every hour of the day.” Her voice trembled, and there were tears in her eyes.

Had M. de Moranges' club comrades and ordinary associates been questioned, they would have declared inexplicable the attraction exercised over him by Madame Beaudouin.

The miracle was easy to explain, and lay entirely in the fact of the infinite womanliness of Aunt Clémentine. She was such a thorough woman; so generous and tender, so self-forgetting and true!

"Why did you never marry?" she asked, almost timidly.

"Because—" and then he hesitated; "well it is a difficult thing to say—because I never found a woman I could rely upon."

"That is a grave accusation; but did you ever love any woman with all your heart?"

"No," replied Moranges, unhesitatingly.

Madame Beaudouin looked pained.

"I can never understand men," she said, after a pause of a moment; "you find them recoil before the slightest sacrifice made to an honest and pure affection, and then all at once casting away their lives, names, everything for a folly," (M. de Moranges winced); "they will pass half their lives in flying from what they call love, and yet commit acts of absolute madness for some one for whom they do not care. What do they gain by it?" she uttered these last words musingly, and almost as though speaking to herself.

"Nothing," responded the Marquis, in a dejected tone; "but they find that out too late. We have become complicated machines, we men, and what seemed

plain and simple to our grandfathers, puzzles us. Listen; I, for instance, pass for a sinner, as I said before; well, I tell you now, that I don't believe the man lives who, if he could be perfectly sure of a deep, true, entire, pure, out-and-out devotion in a woman (but mark you, both out-and-out and pure), would not sacrifice everything he possesses to obtain it."

Madame Beaudouin looked him steadily, inquiringly, and full in the face.

He answered her gaze.

"Yes," he repeated, "everything he possesses. But we don't believe; we learn too early to know the women who have brought up our possible wives, and we shrink from being made dupes. Love marriages don't succeed in France; but we gain nothing in the end."

And so they talked on till late, with long intervals of silence, and Madame Beaudouin felt there was an anxiety or a grief the Marquis did not venture to confide to her. Once or twice he seemed on the point of communicating to her some hidden care, but he always checked himself.

When he was preparing to take his leave,—

"I shall never forget," he said, "the kindness you have shown me. I may have to absent myself shortly from Paris—perhaps even from France; but wherever I go, I shall carry your memory with me; I entreat of you to believe what I say; among all my faults I have never been accused of insincerity. It is not in my way to be a phrasemaker."

"I wish I could have been of real use or comfort to you," replied Madame Beaudouin, as she held out her hand to him.

"You have been so, and you can be so still more, if you will promise me, whatever you hear of me, to reserve your judgment, in spite of my reputation, and not think worse of me than of any other erring mortal."

There was an air of almost mournful earnestness in the Marquis that strangely impressed Aunt Clémentine. She did not withdraw her hand from his as she asked,—

"Is there no way in which I can be of use to you?"

For one moment he hesitated, and then,—

"I fear none!" he answered; "in your career as a hospital visitor and nurse, you have seen, doubtless, many a sickening sight, tended many a ghastly wound; but you have mostly seen your patients die of their ills, which is, in fact, nothing; there is worse than that; there is——But what am I talking of? forgive me, and again I say, promise me one thing, when you hear me abused on all hands, denounced by my nearest relations, and held up to shame, promise me to remain silent."

"I will do more, I will pray for you," said, simply and almost tenderly, Aunt Clémentine.

"I wish I thought that was of any good!" replied the Marquis, with some of his old gaiety.

"May I try to defend you?" she said.

"Not for worlds! what I am about to do cannot be defended."

"Why do you do it?" added not severely, but seriously, Madame Beaudouin.

"That you could only understand if once you came to see what a terrible mistake life has seemed to be to some men."

When M. de Moranges had left her, Aunt Clémentine felt more than ever convinced of her theory that all men suffer, and that therefore all men are to be pitied.

CHAPTER XV.

A Sinner but no Saint.

WHEN his uncle had spoken to him at Clavreuil of the doubts that were harassing him, Olivier's first feeling was one of apprehension for himself and annoyance with Claudine. For a mere nothing he would have actually taken his uncle's part, and, from every possible point of view, he was disposed to feel irritated against Claudine. Why had she crossed his path? why had she taken a fancy to him? why had she not left him in peace? He was utterly oblivious of the readiness with which he himself had become her accomplice, and only chafed at the notion of the bother which her ill-timed, ill-placed passion for him might entail upon him.

Here lies the difference between a pure and an impure attachment. The former rises superior to all mere material separation; the latter knows of actual presence only, and you annul it if you separate the so-called loving couple. Away from the Sphinx, Olivier, as has been already stated, was liberated from any attraction she might exercise over him, and simply vexed at having the lazy easy-goingness of his existence disturbed. Besides, though M. de Beauvoisin lacked the keen aptitude for planning and combining that is one of the springs of avarice, he thought upon the subject of his uncle's inheritance pretty much as did the Dowager.

He could not imagine his son (poor innocent little Pierre was the invariable stalking-horse of them all) being frustrated of the fortune which was his by every law, human and divine.

M. de Beauvoisin could with perfect sincerity serve his uncle's interests, as far as Florestan de Nesves was concerned, and there was no difficulty in answering for the perfect innocence of Claudine, in whatever concerned that young gentleman. Olivier did clear up everything in the direction first taken by his uncle's suspicions, and yet the suspicions (self-sufficing seemingly) were not dispelled. Florestan de Nesves on the other hand was too useful a blind for the sagacious Aspasia (and she was necessarily always consulted) to agree to his being totally banished, so that Olivier could only resort to a treatment of him so light, that M. de Moranges could not persist in regarding him as dangerous. Olivier admitted that Florestan admired Claudine immensely, but he pledged his honour and credit (as well he might!) that she barely noticed the fact of his existence. And then—foolish people being for ever foolish—Olivier went too far, and said the unwise thing he could have said, though he did not guess why it was so unwise: he said that indeed the conduct of the Sphinx was so irreproachable, and her allegiance to the Marquis so imperturbable, that it had got to be a joke at the clubs that any one who should really wish to pay court to her would have to do so before M. le Maire, and M. le Curé, in the exercise of their functions.

"Good God!" cried the Marquis, "do you mean to say that Nesves would marry her?"

"Oh! my dear uncle, I didn't say that!" had been Beauvoisin's reply. "I only said it was quite a club-joke on account of Madame Claudine's conduct being so very proper," (he called her Madame on these occasions, and thought that a stroke of policy).

And still M. de Moranges doubted and feared—he knew not what. He was misled as to the man, not as to the thing, and the truth had hit him, and hit him hard. The magnificent Marquis was full of anxiety, and had lost his faith in himself.

M. de Beauvoisin, like all weak, undecided natures, was for ever internally complaining, either of his bad luck, as he called it, or of somebody's bad behaviour to him. He thought himself so hardly dealt by! When he was away it was all very well, and he was persuaded it would be the easiest thing in the world to break loose from the Sphinx; but when he got back into her atmosphere, he had no longer any wish to break loose from her, but found himself momentarily very well off, and quieted his alarms by thinking that, after all, things might go on as they were, and that they would come to an end of themselves somehow. Oh! that "somehow!" what a part it plays in the lives of these purposeless men!

As usual, our friend Aspasia was in reality the guiding star of these two destinies. So long as she did not attempt to take the Sphinx's plaything from her, she ruled supreme over Claudine, as over Olivier; but

several "feelers" put out by her had caused her to perceive that a reckless outbreak would ensue if she made the slightest move towards snatching its doll from the infant. Mlle. Mourjon was out of patience with Claudine, and puzzled as to how she should play her own game. She could not let Olivier escape, that was clear; for the Sphinx, once grown desperate, would reveal everything, and her (Aspasie's) fortunes would be marred, both with the Dowager and with M. de Moranges.

She must go on, therefore, plotting and combining, and preventing a crisis, and what she termed devoting herself (!), all which constituted no small amount of hard work, and really left no leisure whatever to poor Mlle. de Mourjonville.

The most amusing part of it all (and it did divert Aspasie when she thought of it) was, that her cleverness was such a relief to M. de Beauvoisin's slow wit that, although he feared her mortally, and although she morally sat upon him like the old man of the sea, and was never to be shaken off, yet in his worst moments of perplexity she alone could cheer him up, and by her sharp, comical vein of humour, induce him to come to the agreeable conclusion that everything was "no matter."

One person alone was troubled by what was passing, and that person was Count Dupont. As Mlle. Mourjon thoroughly appreciated his intelligence, she took the best possible care that he should obtain no insight into her game; but Henri's vigilance was not altogether to be deceived, only it went astray too, and tended towards

an erroneous aim. A word or two, dropped in joke by M. de Moranges months ago, recurred to him, and he asked himself all at once if the witty and practical minded Mlle. Aspasia might not be in some degree dangerous for Olivier. His fears pointed principally to the latter's purse, but not exclusively, for he was quite aware that a woman of her kind may absorb and totally subjugate a man of Olivier's species.

Count Dupont busied himself with discovering all he could touching Mlle. Mourjon's past, and, when he had collected a certain sum of details, he resolved he would take an opportunity of satisfying himself as to the real state of affairs between Mlle. de Mourjonville and Olivier. One day chance served him: he had called at the Hotel Moranges and been admitted (as he thought he perceived, to Mlle. Aspasia's decided annoyance). They were alone, Claudine being shut up in her room with a headache; one of those eternal *migraines* women are so peculiarly subject to in France.

Henri Dupont made himself so pleasant that Mlle. Aspasia was thrown off her guard, and showed to great advantage, and for twenty minutes these two chatted away in apparently perfect good fellowship, and spent between them no inconsiderable amount of wit.

Suddenly, but always in the most playful tone:—

"Why did you never tell me you were Camille Leblond's sister?" asked Count Dupont, looking his adversary straight in the face.

"I am not so," replied Aspasia, hurriedly, and with decidedly a slight, though well hidden, embarrassment.

"What!" cried he, and his look said unmistakeably: "You can't take me in!"

"I mean," rejoined the lady in waiting, "that I am not her sister, only her half-sister; you know, however much one may be above puerile prejudice, one does not blazon forth certain relationships. Poor Camille! I'm sure I have no desire to be hard upon her, but still when one is a respectable person, and belonging to a respectable family" (this was an inevitable allusion), "one does feel deeply certain things. I may marry one day, and I should hardly wish that, before knowing me well, an honest man should be informed of my connection with a person like Camille."

All this was said with such consummate art, with such a mixture of frankness, and propriety, and humility, and common sense, that Dupont did not quite know how to continue his examination.

Aspasie saved him the trouble: "It is a very difficult thing for men of the world like you," she said, unaffectedly, "to realise the position of women like me. Your habits lead you among people whose situations in life are clearly defined, and mostly above any struggles (unless the struggles of ambition): in your world there is but little compromise: people are of it, or out of it; if of it, you excuse everything; if out of it, you ignore or condemn. You do not stop to take into account what the trials may be, nor if they are honestly overcome; it is not a fair way of dealing according to my estimate, and it is one which I should have almost thought you would avoid."

Henri Dupont felt himself put in one moment altogether in the wrong, and very much in the case of the man whose "Tartar" refused to be "caught."

He had, after a certain fashion, to excuse himself, which is a fatal proceeding when you have intended to carry all things before you.

However, Mlle. Aspasia was eminently good-natured, or seemed to be so, and bearing no malice, readily went into particulars concerning her birth, parentage, and education.

She expatiated on the vicissitudes of life, on the hardships of women, on the helplessness which had made her mother marry a second time, and marry beneath her; and the amount of her indulgence towards her half-sister knew no bounds. She was all mercy and charity, and not cantingly so. It was her moderation and reasonableness that left Henri Dupont so at a loss to find fault with her. He could only follow her lead, and seem to take a lively interest in Madame Théophile Mardonnet (*née* Leblond), and all at once a few words of Aspasia's gave him an interest in this lady. She had alluded to her early fascination for M. de Beauvoisin, and Henri asked her rather eagerly whether she was sure they had never met since Mardonnet's return.

Aspasia smiled: "My dear Count Dupont," she said, "you may think as lowly as you like of people of what you call 'our class,' but there are some feelings which are the same in all, and I do not fancy that Madame Mardonnet or her husband would like

to meet M. de Beauvoisin, since what passed in earlier days. My brother-in-law" (she added this with much quiet dignity, and did not evade the parentage with the "Deputy") "is a very worthy man, in spite of his weakness (for it was a weakness) in marrying Camille, and I dare say poor Camille will lead a very exemplary life in the end."

"Her husband was desperately in love with her, I fancy," said Henri, in a way which made Mlle. Mourjon imagine he knew more than she was aware of. Frankness appeared to be her cue, and so looking Count Dupont in the face,—

"I have a great mind," said she, with sudden animation, "to tell you the whole story of what occurred seven years ago."

"I think I know it," he replied, and regaining somewhat of the ground he had lost.

"I will venture to say you do not," retorted Aspasia, warmly; "I'll venture to say that you are in perfect ignorance of the obligations that M. de Beauvoisin owes to my brother-in-law."

Count Dupont stared at Mlle. de Mourjonville.

"Yes," she repeated, "obligations, and very serious ones too: listen. The Marquis de Beauvoisin thought himself in love with poor Camille, who was a reigning beauty then (and such a child!), and, as you well know, he was under age, and could dispose of not one farthing. Well! I suppose he contrived to borrow small sums from one person and another, but one day he got into a mess. Camille's poor, little, silly head

was turned by a certain set of pearls and emeralds she had seen in Marret's window, and probably her youthful adorer guessed what would be the power gained over her by whoever presented her with the jewels. Their price was sixty thousand francs. Well, one fine morning they were given to her by M. de Beauvoisin!"

(Count Dupont listened unmoved.)

Aspasie, after an imperceptible pause, went on.

"I need not tell you he had done what many a young man in his situation has done before him; he had signed bills for the amount at three months date, and when the date came he had not the shadow of a resource wherewith to meet his engagements. Théophile Mardonnet got that money for him, and saved M. de Beauvoisin from severe annoyance, if not from disgrace."

"I knew all that," observed, tranquilly, Henri Dupont. "Are you quite sure that is *all* that occurred at that epoch?"

Before the hard interrogative look that Count Dupont fixed upon her, while uttering the above words, a slight flush and a slight tremor seemed to pass over Mlle. Mourjon's face and figure, but perhaps it might be the flickering flame of the fire by which they were sitting. It was so slight.

"All?" echoed Aspasie; "all? why, surely it is enough. I really do not know what in your station is regarded as disgrace, or what as a service; but I, in my humble sphere, should have felt the deepest

gratitude for any man who had done to my son or brother what my brother-in-law did for M. de Beauvoisin."

"Mardonnet was paid, I presume, capital and interest," remarked Henri Dupont.

"And interest of interests," added Aspasia; "for you forget that he had to pay heavy interest himself for more than two years, on the sums he borrowed."

"And you think that was really all?" said again Count Dupont.

"What else could there be?" inquired Mlle. Mourjon.

Count Dupont looked her through and through, and then said,—

"I'm sure I don't know, but I thought perhaps you did."

When their conference was over, Henri felt that he had failed to find any confirmation for his notions of even the merest flirtation between Olivier and Mlle. de Mourjonville. She was disappointed, for she had decidedly not succeeded in impressing Count Dupont with a sense of the obligations conferred on M. de Beauvoisin by her brother-in-law, the Deputy.

Long after Henri had gone away, she sat gazing at the fire, and seemingly brooding over some subject not particularly pleasant.

CHAPTER XVI.

For Ever.

M. DE LANCOUR had been nearly three months absent, and the end of January was approaching. The weather was unusually hard, even the Seine being frozen over, so that, to quote the words of Henri Dupont, both winter and its pleasures set in with extraordinary severity.

Never had there been such hard work known, in the way of balls and *raouts* as our neighbours term them, and the din and roar created by the rotation of Fashion's wheel as it went whirring perpetually round was enough to deafen any reasonable mortal.

Claire took her fair proportion of all this so-called amusement, and went to all the entertainments of what Paris calls its society, adding thereto the receptions and balls of the Corps Diplomatique, which was a kind of concession.

From time to time M. de Beauvoisin accompanied his wife, and their behaviour to each other was uniformly marked by great kindness on her side, and an unmistakeable deference on his.

One night, at a concert at the Duc de Vivienne's, the talk was everywhere of the expedition to Algeria. Such glory had been achieved! such deeds had been

done! no one spoke of anything save the bulletins received that morning. M. de Lancour's name was in every mouth, for to him reverted a large portion of the brilliant success achieved. The troops under his orders had mainly decided the first day's victory, and to the wise as well as daring manner in which he had led his men was attributable the important result obtained. Victor had been promoted to the rank of *chef d'escadron*, and was the youngest "commandant" of of the African army.

"There now," said M. de Beauvoisin, "see how people are always wrong to want to meddle with other people's affairs. Why, when Victor would go off to Africa last autumn all of a sudden, what a row all our people made! I never heard the last of it. He was 'restless,' and I don't know what all besides, and now only just see how right he was; he knew what was best for him; and that's what I always say; a man may not be a genius, but he always knows what suits himself better than other people do. Besides, Victor is out and out the finest fellow in the whole world."

After this for him tremendously long speech, Olivier took breath, yawned, and thoroughly exhausted, subsided for the remainder of the evening.

Claire, unnoticed, stole towards the conservatory, and, as the second part of the concert was just beginning, found herself there alone.

She seated herself by one of the windows, and the heat indoors being great, and the odour of the plants

oppressive, she opened it and looked out into the dark blue starry night.

Stars were everywhere, on both canopy and carpet; for the spotless snow, spreading over the wide spaces of the garden, replied in sparkles to the bright glances of the thickly strewn jewels of the sky. And oh! how full was the void of that still night with one image, and how loud was its silence to Claire's heart with one name!

She crossed both her hands over her knees (it was a favourite attitude of hers) and sat hushing the deep joy within her.

From the distant music-room, sounds floated unhindered by any earthly presence to her ear: came as though wafted down to her from the fathomless sky. Here and there she caught, almost unconsciously, a word; once the cry of Addio in the *Miserere* of the *Trovatore*, and then only sounds vaguely sweet; the crystal tones of Nilsson, ringing out bell-like a Swedish air, or the wild wailings of one of Chopin's mystic melodies. Every nerve in Claire quivered to the immaterial touch of what surrounded her, and snow, stars, and the air of the night and the breath of leaves and flowers, and the sounds of music, all spoke to her soul with a direct meaning, and awoke responsive vibrations.

As, forcibly combating her dream, Claire rose to go, there came, borne to her on a voice of strangely penetrating beauty, the words,—

Se divisi fummo in terra
Ne congiunga il nume in ciel!

She stood still for one second, and an inward echo repeated over and again the plaint of the lover of *Lucia*.

Yes! they had been divided upon earth, but why should this impress her so mournfully now?

That night, as the young Marquise laid down to rest, she still heard the words—

Se divisi fummo in terra;

and felt as though some warning were conveyed to her.

For many days in the infinitely small world which styles itself magnificently the great world, the expedition against the Kabyles, and the glory achieved by Victor de Lancour were the all-engrossing subject of conversation.

The expedition was only just in its beginning; the first two or three days of it were crowned with the most brilliant success, and then the corps d'armée had to penetrate into some defiles, reputed very dangerous, and to track the enemy among his mountain fastnesses.

For nearly a week there came no more bulletins, and then there came one short telegram. The advanced guard had fallen into an ambush, and it was feared might have sustained some losses.

Madame Beaudouin was sitting by her fire reading—it was not much past noon—when the young Marquise, unannounced, as was frequently her wont, came in. She did not kiss her aunt, nor take her hand. She merely came up to where she sat, and said to her:—

"Aunt, was not the Minister of War a great friend of your husband's?"

"Yes, dearest, he was so," replied Madame Beaudouin, struck by the rigidity of Claire's manner, and by the harsh brevity with which she spoke; "he owed everything to M. Beaudouin?"

"Are you still friends with him?" pursued Claire.

"Most intimate friends."

"Then, aunt, go to him at once; have a carriage called" (and she stretched out her own hand and rang the bell) "and make him tell you the truth, about this telegram" (she took a newspaper from her muff, and gave it to her aunt), "the whole truth, aunt," she added, with almost stern insistence, "Go now, at once." (A footman opened the door, and Claire bade him call a carriage; at which the man looking astounded, "there is no time for my aunt to wait for her own horses," said she, sternly.)

Madame Beaudouin rose, feeling that her niece must be obeyed, and in five minutes she had caused bonnet, cloak, and all necessary wrappings to be brought, and was ready to do Claire's bidding.

"I will wait for you here, aunt," added Claire, when the *fiacre* was announced; and then she did take her hand, and wrung it.

"Make him tell you all, aunt," she said, in still the same unpleasant tone—but then suddenly the voice sank—"tell you who—tell you who—" she repeated it twice over, trying to complete the sentence, but could not.

So Madame Beaudouin went, and Claire waited; and two hours elapsed. During those two hours the young Marquise never stirred,—scarcely seemed to breathe. When she heard her aunt come back, and the porte cochère open to receive her, all the blood left her face, and her lips parted in a gasp.

Madame Beaudouin was so long in coming in to that room again, where Claire was waiting for her.

And when she did come, how poor was all language compared to the heart's instantaneous intuition!

Claire stood where she was, mute, tearless, stunned. Yes! by God's infinite mercy, numbed to what it was beyond her natural strength to bear.

* * * * *

It was the same story; and twenty years rolling backwards bared Aunt Clémentine's wound as though Raymond de Varades were freshly dead; and this very freshness of grief it was in Madame Beaudouin that unlocked the hardbound currents of Claire's woe, and melted her stern sorrow.

The first word that passed her lips was:

"Mine! mine now, for ever! mine, before all the world!"

And then, shaken by convulsive sobbings, Claire wound herself round her aunt, and clung greedily to her who had suffered as she was suffering.

Evening was closing in, and Madame Beaudouin felt that Claire could not, nay, ought not, to return that day to her husband's home. She, simple and true as she was, resorted to her first subterfuge, and

it did not come easy to her; but Claire must be first thought of! So she sent a few lines to Olivier, saying she was very ill, and had ventured to accept his wife's offer of spending the night by her side.

That done, she retired to her own apartment with Claire, and through her maid gave out to her own establishment that a sudden attack of acute neuralgia confined her to her room.

And what a night they passed, those two loving, lonely women. A night in which the communings of soul with soul were so immediate that words were all superfluous. One word alone seemed to have any sense for Claire, and through all her agony recurred perpetually to her lips.

"Mine! mine now!"

And when towards the dawn tired nature gave way, and Claire, letting her head droop upon Aunt Clémentine's lap as she sat on the floor at her feet, closed her eyes in fitful sleep:

"Mine only! mine for ever!" she murmured in a low whisper.

The next day grief had to be combated, and duty to be obeyed. The duties of the mother, and (whether she would or not) of the wife—for such she was before the world—asked for Claire back, and Claire went and did her duty, for Aunt Clémentine said to her that the more bravely she behaved the more worthy she would be of him, and the nearer to him; and she steeled herself to do all that he would have wished done by the woman he loved.

As she was crossing her aunt's threshold to return to her own home, she stopped, and, putting her arms round Madame Beaudouin's neck: "Aunt," she said, in faltering accents, while a flush of the deepest crimson mantled over her every feature; "Aunt, I should so like, now——" and she hesitated, "I should so like to see *her*." And with eyes swimming in tears, and in a tone of entreaty, "Think what her agony must be," she added; "for she loved him, aunt; dear, dear aunt: ought not I to comfort her?"

Madame Beaudouin strained her niece to her heart in a long silent embrace, saying gravely, "I will go to her, darling; and, when I have spoken with her, we will go together."

CHAPTER XVII.

Lightly Loving, lightly Lost.

WHEN Madame Beaudouin went to Madame de Mottefort's door, she was informed that she had gone to Versailles, where a cousin of hers lived who had never entirely ceased to hold communication with her, but used to pay her visits from time to time.

At the end of a fortnight Berthe returned to her Paris abode, and Madame Beaudouin immediately set forth upon her charitable errand to the misguided and doubly-stricken woman.

She did not give her name, but merely said she wished to see Madame de Mottefort upon particular and pressing business. The latter begged her to wait a few moments till she had finished dressing.

Aunt Clémentine was shown into a small drawing-room, prettily furnished, but where no one single object was remarkable for good taste, and in which it seemed, to Madame Beaudouin, that there were traces of impending departure. The flower-stands were empty; in the bookcases only here and there a stray volume was left on the shelves, and in one or two places on the walls a nail stood out forlorn, and a darker patch of colour showed where a picture had hung.

"Poor woman!" thought Madame Beaudouin, "she

probably longs to escape from whatsoever recalls *his* memory, and bears witness to the hours spent together!"

A door opening behind her gave passage to a young, handsome, elegantly dressed woman, but upon whose countenance sat no trace of misery unbearable. She was not in mourning, which fact escaped her visitor's notice at first. The bearing of the two was singularly different: whilst in Berthe's manner there was the polite reserve with which one mere woman of the world meets another who is a stranger to her, and in her eye lurked a glance of something almost akin to suspicion,—Aunt Clémentine obeyed solely the impulse of a thoroughly unworldly nature, and sought to bring consolation where she supposed there was deadly suffering. Without a word she went up to Berthe, and taking both the latter's hands in hers, gazed at her tenderly, tearfully, and mutely offered her such pity as angels give.

Madame de Mottefort felt that she was in the presence of a woman different from any she had ever known, and, blushing deeply, cast down her eyes, embarrassed.

"Poor child! poor child!" they were the first words that passed Madame Beaudouin's lips, and then, "I am Aunt Clémentine," she added, simply. "My brother was *his* uncle, and we all loved him so dearly! . . ." and opening her arms, she embraced Berthe, who still seemed not quite at home with her visitant.

Madame Beaudouin's was one of those straight,

simple natures that are completed by sorrow. Her whole life had been lived so apart from the ordinary world, so exclusively divided between self-devotion and *one* grief, that to the unconscious grandeur of her soul all things grand came home. From the constant habit of measuring things by an Infinite standard, she had grown to be lenient to much that shocks the world, and to be only severe to such derelictions as it takes not into account. To her, Berthe de Mottefort, who had renounced the world for the sake of the man she loved, was not an object of Pharisaical loathing, as she was stated to be to the dainty dames who reputed themselves virtuous because they kept upon good terms with the world; she was an object of intense commiseration, because she had sacrificed herself. And poor dear Aunt Clémentine, who was a genuine Christian, and did her best and utmost to follow her divine Master's teachings, thought that if he could be so pitiful towards the woman whom he told to "go and sin no more," it was not incumbent upon her, a weak human creature, to be relentless.

She recognised in her own heart that one of the secrets of her own strength had been the boundless love which would not ever have permitted her to sink in the esteem of him she so infinitely loved, but she could comprehend a love that should be unlike this, and that, wanting in pride, should unhesitatingly cast away everything at the feet of the beloved. Who told her this might not even be the better, humbler nature? It was not for her to judge; and, therefore, instead of

looking down upon this poor sinful one, or feeling in the least degree *preachful* towards her, she went to her in sweet, loving mercy, and, with arms and heart opened, sought to prevent her from feeling utterly cast out from the communion of her more deserving (or it might be luckier) sisters.

In affairs of the heart—in affairs, namely, where the heart is in any way brought into play—no one ever cheats another long; and the mere contact of Aunt Clémentine sufficed, for a reason which perhaps might not at first be divined, to embarrass Madame de Mottefort she felt herself esteemed beyond her deserts, placed in a position which she did not know how to keep up.

Berthe acknowledged Madame Beaudouin's superiority over herself, long before her own inferiority became evident to Madame Beaudouin.

"Poor child!" repeated over and over the latter, and making Berthe sit down beside her on a sofa, she continued to hold her hands in her own, and to speak words of tender comfort to her, to still her sorrow as it were, as a mother tries to still the wailings of some motherless infant. It did not at first occur to Madame Beaudouin to ask herself whether the overwhelming sorrow was really there? She had passed through her own fiery ordeal, and was now living it over again in Claire's misery, and the image of their own "agonies unto death" shut out from her vision any possible picture of pain more easily endured.

She had drawn Madame de Mottefort into telling

her own story of the past, thinking it was kindest to give her the opportunity of presenting her own conduct in the least unfavourable light, and of finding the utmost sum of palliation for faults so terribly grave. But somehow or other Berthe's account was unsatisfactory, and Madame Beaudouin felt a kind of disappointment at the comparatively slight interest awakened in her by the tale of a life full of such apparently moving incidents. She accused herself of want of sympathy, before she would admit that the fault lay with Madame de Mottefort.

It was not that, in the story Berthe told of her own troubles, there was anything you would have been warranted in calling wrong: the words were well enough—not the faintest trace of a sentiment that could shock anyone, not the shadow of an indelicacy of expression—No! the words were all right, but somehow the accent, the tone, the feeling that prompted them was false. There was a want of gravity in this woman who had assumed to grave a responsibility upon herself; a want of enthusiasm there, where the acts committed were those which should emanate only from an enthusiastic nature.

Still Madame Beaudouin would not allow herself to condemn.

"You were unhappy at home," she said, compassionately, when Berthe had told her of her mother having died when she was a child.

"I was very much hurt by my father's second marriage," replied Berthe. "My stepmother was young

and good-looking, and of course wished to appear to advantage, and did not like a girl of fourteen or fifteen to look after, and in a couple of years take out into the world—it was natural on her part—I do not blame her” (Aunt Clémentine seemed at a loss to understand clearly what this meant), “but it was a misfortune for me, and the only way of getting rid of me was to put me to school; there I staid till my marriage with M. de Mottefort—I was seventeen.”

“And your husband?” inquired gently her listener.

“He was thirty years older than me,” answered Berthe, and these words, plainly spoken, but telling their tale truly, were pitiful, and went to Madame Beaudouin’s heart.

“Poor thing!” she murmured, and pressed Madame de Mottefort’s hand again tenderly; “and you did not attempt to make any opposition to the marriage?”

Berthe looked at Aunt Clémentine as though not exactly comprehending what she meant.

“I could not have attempted to oppose my father’s wish,” she said, “for M. de Mottefort was an unexceptionable offer; he was of an excellent old family, had served with distinction, was already a Lieut.-Colonel, and had fifty thousand francs a year, besides hopes. I could not have found a pretext for opposition.” Madame de Mottefort uttered these words with such innocent frankness, that in her turn Madame Beaudouin was embarrassed, and did not know what to say.

“I should not have dreamed of making any oppo-

sition," resumed Madame de Mottefort; "besides, we lived very happily together" (this escaped her, and it was only as she caught the strange look of Aunt Clémentine's eyes fixed upon her that she felt she had borne witness against herself). "I had no complaint to make against M. de Mottefort," she added, in a lower tone, and looking down rather confusedly; "he was very kind to me, and is a most worthy, excellent man."

"You had no children?" inquired Madame Beaudouin.

"Two," was the reply, with still downcast eyes.

Madame Beaudouin dropped the hand she had hitherto held in hers.

"You had two children?" she echoed, in a tone of voice so involuntarily reproving that Berthe blushed scarlet.

"My little girl died when she was four years old," she rejoined, and tears began to trickle over her burning cheeks; "my son is living, and is between nine and ten years old."

"The ways of Providence are hidden," observed Aunt Clémentine, relenting at sight of the mother's sorrow for the memory of her dead child. "It is not for us to judge; your trials have been severe, poor woman, and God's mercy is unbounded. You must have suffered cruelly."

"Cruelly, indeed!" repeated Berthe, raising her eyes upwards, and giving way to a burst of genuine grief the moment the chord of self-commiseration was

touched. "The world is so hard!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands, "so hard upon any unfortunate woman who is carried away by her heart!"

Aunt Clémentine was all mercy and softness again at this, and put her arms protectingly round Berthe's shoulders, pillowed her head upon her bosom, and soothed and comforted her, and let her cry her heart out. Poor stricken woman! had she not lost everything that made life worth having? Was not he snatched from her whom she had sinfully worshipped and made her idol?—and was she not utterly alone?—friendless and forlorn, and bereft of all those compensations which the unerring find in their neighbour's sympathy and in the favour of public opinion? Did not the world cast her forth? Did not the so-called righteous condemn? Where, then, was this unfortunate to find a refuge if the really pure-minded could not show themselves lenient, and if Christian souls refused to remember how all human weakness is liable to fall?

"We must help you, my poor child," whispered Madame Beaudouin, with an accent of maternal tenderness; "we must try to guard you from despair. To the truly penitent God always lends a willing ear, and never refuses consolation to those who mourn over their past faults; we will pray together; my niece, Madame de Beauvoisin, will come to you—she wishes to see you; and whilst you deplore the sin, we will only remember the sacrifice—we will only think of how you gave up all for him."

"Alas! I did indeed," exclaimed Berthe, with a fresh burst of tears.

And when Madame Beaudouin had calmed this outbreak anew, she sought to induce Madame de Mottefort to speak with her of her future plans.

She knew (for Berthe had already told her of this) that she had, from her mother and from her father also, an independent fortune of her own, which, from the hour of her departure from his house, her husband had, with the utmost generosity, made over to her. Aunt Clémentine's notion was, that she should, after a retirement of some months in a convent, settle herself somewhere in the country, not far from Combeville or Malleray, so as to be for the larger half of the year within reach of herself or of Claire. In her pure, simple mind, the only thing remaining after the greatness of the sin, was the greatness of the expiation.

"You have renounced the world," she said, earnestly; "but the world is always just in the long run, and you may win its respect, yet, by your repentance, my poor child;" and thus saying, she bent down and imprinted a kiss of holy forgiveness upon Berthe de Mottefort's brow; "nothing is irretrievable," she added. "You were feeble in your resolves against Victor, but you made the sacrifice, you must complete it now, and hallow it; and in your future road through life, you will find a sister on either side. Claire and I will never desert you, and as much as our humble efforts may avail, we will help you to sanctify the memory of the past, and regain your own esteem."

Berthe receded from Madame Beaudouin's embrace, and seemed as it were to shrink into herself.

"You are very good," she murmured; "very kind, and I am deeply indebted to you—but I cannot accept your offers of service. I——" she hesitated and found no words for expressing what she had to convey; even her dim morality realised the extent to which she had been over exalted. She measured the height from which she was about to fall, and shuddered.

"You, perhaps, crave for utter solitude," remarked Madame Beaudouin, coming to her aid; "it is natural, too; no one knows how another takes grief, and each must tread his own path towards atonement and consolation. But remember that of Claire and of myself you must learn to think as though we were *his* sisters."

While Madame Beaudouin was speaking, Berthe had been composing a part for herself, which she now prepared to enter upon with much dignity.

"M. de Mottefort," she began, in a tone she tried to render grave, but without venturing to raise her eyes to Madame Beaudouin's face: "M. de Mottefort consents to overlook the events of the last four or five years, and——" she paused, "I am going to return to my husband," she added at last.

Aunt Clémentine had shrunk from her now, and stood, like one bewildered, staring at Berthe with evidently no power of taking in what she meant.

Poor Aunt Clémentine! she could pity and pardon

all things grand and true, but the low, small, vulgar, motives of this vain propriety-seeker scared her. The levity, the emptiness, the want of truth everywhere, whether in the sin or in the shame, wrung her very heart.

"It is so much better," muttered Berthe, incapable of bearing this silence; "for our son; the world forgets in a few years; and, then, for his sake,—it is so much better for his sake." But she never looked at her, never, once.

("The world forgets!" Yes, Berthe, it does; it asks for no better than to forget—but you! have you forgotten?)

Aunt Clémentine was overpowered by the rush of her tumultuous thoughts. Her sweet, pure, ardently-loving Claire, and that young hero in Algeria, dead for duty and renouncement's sake, they swept before her eyes, mournfully indignant at the miserable creature who had neither renounced nor loved. Was it then true that in true passion alone lies the strength of right doing; and that whilst the pure may be passionate, the genuinely passionate must be pure? Oh, Raymond, Raymond! you too arose before her, and forced her into a vehemence no one had ever seen in her before.

Going close up to Berthe,—

"Had you no friend near you when you left your husband for M. de Lancour?" she asked, in a voice that was quite unlike her own, and that forced Madame de Mottefort to look at her.

"Oh, yes," answered Berthe, taking refuge in talk; "I had one very kind friend, a cousin, indeed, the same one with whom I have just been staying, and who has seen my husband, and reconciled us; she did her best, but, alas! I could not help myself!" and she added some details proving her friend's eager desire to save her; but she always recurred to her declaration that she "couldn't help herself:" and, after prating for some seconds, whilst her listener looked her through and through, "*I could not help myself*," she concluded.

"I mean," retorted Aunt Clémentine, "had you not one friend who told you you *could*? Not one brave enough to say to you, 'Woman, that sin you can avoid!' not one who stood in your way and drove you back, and told you that nothing compelled you, and that you could have easily resisted? My God!" she cried, fervently, "is this the way souls are lost?" and, turning her back upon the trembling woman, who crouched before her, she left the room and the house.

The impression produced on Madame Beaudouin was a singularly strong one; outwardly, the strongest she had ever received; for she rose in revolt against Berthe de Mottefort's levity, in the name of a whole life of abnegation and of victory over passionate love.

When she came to meet Claire, she could only convey to her fitfully, and with tears of indignation and pain, the bitter disappointment she had endured. Claire had never seen her aunt thus moved, and the flash of the eye, and flush of the cheek, were those of

anger—a feeling by which no one had ever beheld the serenity of that calm, gentle face disturbed.

“She never loved him,” she cried; “and incurred lightly all that heavy load of guilt! Lightly! How merciful is God in having taken her daughter from her. How could such a woman teach a daughter to do right? Oh, Claire, Claire!” she added; “that poor, friendless, untaught creature who is with your uncle Moranges, is less fallen than such a woman as this.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Silver Medal.

THE unworthiness of Berthe impressed the young Marquise deeply, but pained her less than it did Aunt Clémentine; firstly, because she was much younger, secondly, because a comparatively greater mixture with the world had familiarised her with certain inferiorities in women; but, above all, because any default in Berthe (especially of this kind) evidently proved a lighter hold on Victor in the past than she was supposed to have had. Claire, bereft of the present and the future, had no consolation save the past, and whatever served to open its gates to her, closed as they, too, had seemed by Victor's attachment to Berthe, was greeted with ardently selfish joy.

Madame Beaudouin's words touching the Sphinx had also struck her niece forcibly, and she permitted herself strange questionings on points which had hitherto been, in her mind, placed absolutely beyond the pale of speculation or doubt.

"That poor, friendless, untaught creature!" had said Madame Beaudouin, when she declared the Sphinx to be less unworthy than Madame de Mottefort. That was a bold assertion, for, after all, Berthe was a lady, a person of Claire's own standing, and whom, as

things had now shaped themselves, she would infallibly some day meet in that society which was common to both, whilst no circumstance that she could possibly imagine would ever bring her together in the same salon with the Sphinx. And at first these superficial ideas, belonging to the conventionalities in which she had been brought up, held their ground against the innovators, and she could not descend to discuss the more or less of guilt in women whose infamous lives prevent their being taken into account, unless wholesale and as a class, *i.e.*, an abstraction.

But Aunt Clémentine, who was purity itself, had said, "poor, friendless, and untaught!" and it was certain that Berthe de Mottefort, who was going back to her husband, and who would one day, with him, be again received by the world, had never been friendless, was not poor, and had been exceedingly well-taught. Ought she not then to have been, under no matter how hard a trial, the evident superior of the miserable *Traviata*!

"Poor, friendless, and untaught!" Still those words rang in her ears, and gradually assumed a practical sense.

"Poor!" Well, but Claire knew of many starving creatures, who, to their honour be it spoken, were virtuous and good, and bore with resignation an intolerable lot. Then, again, "friendless!" Nobody was quite friendless, there was always some one who cared for them. And "untaught!" Why, that was not an excuse, for learning was not required to make people

honest, everybody knew the difference between right and wrong; and Claire, with all her natural high-mindedness, fell into the so ordinary mistake of confounding the acquisition of knowledge with moral teaching. But hidden in her heart lay the bit of true ore that, spite of her own imperfection, responded to the magnet of her aunt's words. Might there not be something to do? some help to give? The question was that of a human soul—for, degraded as the worst sinner may be, he is possessed of a soul, and that is God's gift. If really there were darkness, might not light be let in? If Christian truths had never been Christianly brought home to this pariah, was it now altogether too late?

But what to do? and how to do it? It is not difficult to rescue the indigent; you rest your morality upon your money, and the chances are in your favour, at all events, apparently; but it is none so easy to persuade the rich that they need rescuing; and whatever the Sphinx might once have been, she now ranked among the rich. She was neither poor nor friendless now; she was living in daily habits of luxury, far greater even than Claire herself indulged in; she was, as far as men were concerned, surrounded by whatever Paris held to be most distinguished. The only part, then, of Madame Beaudouin's argument in her favour that held good was that she had been untaught. But would she care now for teaching, the first result whereof would be to snatch her from her luxuriously indolent existence? Berthe, the well-born, well-educated, and in every way well-defended Berthe, had been first false

to her duty, and then false to her love; she had resisted on no one single point, why should this other woman be stronger? And supposing even there were, in this more primitive nature, a larger amount of plain rough worth, how on earth was Claire to find any means of acting on it? How was it to be drawn forth? Had the Sphinx been starving in the streets, or dying on a hospital pallet, Claire felt that she would have got up and gone to her forthwith, and fought with all the arms she knew of, to save the unhappy creature's soul. But she could not walk off to the Hôtel de Moranges, and by her teachings and preachings carry off this lamb (supposing her to be one) from the devourer—the devourer being, too, her own uncle.

It was impossible, it would be so ridiculous! and Claire, whose entire life was now fixed and centred in one supreme absorbent grief, could yet recoil before the idea of ridicule.

She was sorely perplexed, for like all women of her kind in her present situation of heart and mind, she longed for some deed to be done, for some good to be achieved. As usual, circumstances provided for her what she was unable to provide for herself.

She was walking in an alley of the Bois one fine bright forenoon, while the sun shone on the snow-clad branches of the trees, and made them glitter as though bestrewn with powdered diamonds, when Count Dupont rode by. She bowed to him; he caught sight of little Pierre, who, wrapped in furs and velvets, was toddling along at his mother's side, and dismounted. First they

talked of the child, with whom Henri Dupont entered into conversation, *à propos* of the icicles the little fellow wanted to gather upon the trees, and gradually they were drifting into the subject towards which Count Dupont always laboured (but in vain) to bring Claire, whenever they happened to be alone, namely, Olivier. She at once let their talk slacken, and her companion began to think of what he should say next, or whether he had not better beckon to his groom to bring his horse back to him and ride off, when the young Marquise suddenly looked him curiously in the face, saying,—

“When you go to dine with my uncle Moranges, the person who keeps his house for him is always there, is she not?” And then she blushed deeply and looked down, as though shocked at having to approach such a subject.

“Always,” replied Henri, certainly rather surprised at hearing the Sphinx alluded to by a woman of Claire’s description.

“And do you actually know her?” continued the young Marquise.

“All Paris knows her,” rejoined Henri, with a smile.

There was a pause.

“Count Dupont,” recommenced Claire with a kind of timid eagerness, “is that unhappy creature so very—so irretrievably bad, do you think?”

Henri stopped and looked interrogatively at the Marquise.

"Pardon me," he replied, "but in your short phrase there are grouped together all the anomalies into which people in our world inevitably fall when they touch upon this theme; they always go too far one way, or too far the other: you either pity or condemn too much. If you pity her enough to call her unhappy, why do you speak of her as irretrievably bad? and if your conscience tells you that her guilt is irretrievable, why do you pity her enough to call her unfortunate? My dear Marquise, I entreat of you to forgive me, but do you make your inquiry of me merely as a great lady who wishes to know something about the manners and ways of these *Dames aux Camélias*, or do you speak to me as a Christian?"

"I speak to you as a Christian," answered Claire in a low tone, and with an earnest look; "for as a Christian I am seriously desirous of knowing what to think of this woman."

"There is but little to say of her as an individual," said Henri Dupont; "she is merely one of her kind; a kind that, unless society goes to work quite differently, will grow more numerous from year to year; but if you are not prepared to admit that something should be done to save these wretched women as a class, I should be at a loss to show in what particular way this one is deserving of interest. She is for the moment well cared for materially, which many hundreds (or indeed thousands) of her species are not, and she has a chance of something in the future, for your uncle is

far too thorough a *grand seigneur* to allow her ever to be in want."

"But what I meant," interrupted Claire, with a mixture of persistence and hesitation, "was, whether she was aware of her shame? whether she might not be saved yet? whether"—she paused—"what I mean, Count Dupont, is, do you think she likes her position?"

Henri smiled a curious smile.

"I am afraid she does," he replied, shaking his head; "they all do, when it is so comfortable a one as hers."

"How horrible!" ejaculated Claire.

"Yes; it is horrible," resumed Henri Dupont; "horrible in the extreme, to think of crowds of women in our civilised, self-satisfied old Europe, being forced into sin by destitution and ignorance, by the starvation of their bodies and their minds—that is appalling, and cries aloud to heaven."

"But they are taught their religion," objected Claire.

"No, they are not," retorted Count Dupont; "a certain number of precepts and tenets are set down for them, and they repeat them, learn them by rote, but nine times out of ten do not realise their meaning, and, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, cannot apply them, because they are helpless. My dear Marquise," he said, stopping in his walk, "this is one of the subjects it is impossible to discuss with a lady, because conventional terms alter their meaning, and the words

wrong and sin, and whatever they imply, designate objects quite different from those you apply them to. You deal with the mere effect only, whereas the cause is what will have to be dealt with—for the question is the gravest one of our age—but, now I come to advert to it, you ought, if you take such a special interest in this one unfortunate, to be able to find out easily all about her, for she actually comes from your own place.”

“What do you mean?” cried Claire, eagerly; “from Clavreuil?”

“No; but from close by, from St. Martin.”

“Good God! how shocking! poor girl!”

Count Dupont put his hand gently on Madame de Beauvoisin’s muff, and looking full into her face: “Why is it more shocking,” he asked, gravely; “because she takes her origin from your neighbourhood? Why is she poorer, and more to be pitied, because you may, perhaps, know something about her belongings?”

“I can’t say—I don’t know,” answered the young Marquise, blushing at what she recognised as a well-founded reproach; “but you must let me do the little good I can (or try to do it) in my own way—what is her name?”

“Claudine—no; I am wrong there; her real name is Madeleine, it was a whim of your uncle’s to make her call herself Claudine (he didn’t like Madeleine).”

“But Madeleine what?”

“Ah; there you ask more than I know, and yet, I

have heard that too. Mlle. de Mourjonville once told me——”

“Who on earth is she?” inquired the Marquise abruptly.

“Oh, she is altogether another sort of person,” rejoined Henri, almost sternly; “of her you never need know anything (she is the factotum at the Hôtel de Moranges), and she certainly told me Claudine’s name—it is something like Réval—yes, Madeleine Réval, I am pretty sure that is it.”

That said nothing to Claire, and she knew no more than before.

“I had better write to the curé of St. Martin,” she suggested.

“May be,” rejoined Henri; “though for any genuine, practical good he ever did the girl, she might be an utter stranger to him.”

“What age is she?” inquired Claire.

“Not yet twenty.”

The Marquise shuddered.

“How dreadful,” she added; “so young, and so sinful; and probably now devoid of all faith.”

“Well,” replied Count Dupont; “that is not for me to judge. In her strange dark way, there is what some people call religion. She likes going to church immensely, and mutters a string of *Aves* in any danger or emergency. She wears round her neck a little silver medal of the Virgin, and would, I believe, let herself be cut in pieces sooner than part from it.”

"Who gave it her?" asked Claire, in an unsteady voice, and looking away to hide her blushes.

"She will never tell that," was the answer; "but she believes that medal is to preserve her from everything, and heaven only knows what extraordinary prayers she addresses it."

"Count Dupont," said the young Marquise after a rather long silence, and looking at him with a sudden resolve of which he could not guess the cause: "that poor girl must be saved—but there is but one way to do it; my uncle himself must be brought to see the truth; he must give her up, and I will be responsible for her future."

Henri Dupont looked at Claire with an expression in which surprise and curiosity combined with a kind of compassionate admiration.

"I am afraid no one will help you in that crusade," he said; "your uncle Moranges is not a man who has ever received advice from any one, or ever renounced a plan or a whim for the sake of anything upon earth; he may question even your right to interfere."

"I don't mind," retorted Claire with flashing eyes; "I feel I am in the right, and I will not yield. I will apply to my uncle himself. I will go at once to my mother-in-law; she knows her brother well."

"She will not help you."

"Perhaps; but she shall admit that I am right" (and she made a sign to the footman behind her to call the carriage); "I will go to her straight, and then

I will speak to my uncle myself, and I will leave no stone unturned to save that poor unhappy girl."

Henri Dupont bowed low before her, and, as he assisted her into her carriage, "You may," said he, "do what no other woman could. You may even succeed; but, rely upon it, it is a far more difficult task than that of Una's with the lion."

CHAPTER XIX.

Coming to the Point.

CLAIRE drove straight to the house of her mother-in-law, where the *concierge* allowed that his mistress was at home, but where the young Marquise sought in vain for admittance. At last, having obtained the intervention of the Dowager's maid, this functionary delivered to her, in answer to her message, a piece of paper, on which the Dowager stated that business of the most pressing nature prevented her from receiving even her daughter-in-law; but that she would go across to the Hôtel de Beauvoisin before dinner.

Claire was fain to be satisfied with this, and so went her way.

The Dowager, in that dismal boudoir of hers which we have already seen, sat grim and fidgety, looking at the fire, doing nothing, (a rare thing for her!) and waiting for some one or something with evident anxiety.

Very early that morning she had received a note, which had palpably disturbed her, and shortly after receiving which she had issued a formal order to let no living creature in, except a certain Madame Perichon, who, she said, would bring her some papers from the notary, and who was not to be kept waiting one instant.

The note stated that this person would come at two o'clock.

It wanted now six minutes of the hour.

The Dowager's sharp eyes were riveted upon the hands of the clock; and, though her perpetual white wools lay upon her lap, her fingers did not touch them, and the long, bright needles lay idle. Her metallic reserve, as Henri Dupont delighted to call the Dowager's hard-locked demeanour at any crisis, was decidedly upset, and you might fancy you could have heard the stifled sound of agitation within her, like the wild clicklings of a watch whose main-spring is broken. Some master chord had been touched in that steely nature, and the jar persisted still all over.

The hour struck, and appeared to strike upon the Marquise Dowager, herself, for she started and shivered. She was not nervous, that same Marquise; no! neither impressionable, nor sensitive, nor in any way liable to feminine weaknesses. Yet it seemed to be pretty much the same in the end; and the series of small tortures through which she passed during the space of ten minutes, were probably equivalent to what ordinary people feel when suspense racks their more delicate nervous systems.

At last, the noise was heard of the *porte cochère* turning on its hinges, and then came the note upon the *timbre*, announcing a visitor. The progress of the latter from the court to the antechamber seemed a slow one, if you counted it by the frowns and lip-pinchings on the Dowager's countenance; but, at last, the handle

of the room-door turned, and a lady dressed in black, and veiled, entered.

"You are late, Madame!" said the Marquise, committing two mistakes before the footman had made his exit; first, springing to her feet, instead of remaining seated; and next, showing with what impatience she had been waiting.

"Am I so?" replied the veiled lady, in a voice familiar to us.

"Your note said two o'clock: I have waited ten minutes."

"It is not always easy to dispose of one's time," objected the new comer, as, laying aside her veil, she discovered the semblance of Mlle. Aspasia.

"It must be something exceedingly urgent which could make you ask to see me here in my own house," continued the Dowager, allowing her ill-humour to carry her beyond the limits of her habitual prudence; "incurring such a risk!"

These closing words she mumbled, but her visitor heard them.

"Yes," rejoined, coolly, Mlle. de Mourjonville; "and perhaps, after all, I may have allowed myself to be run away with by my zeal in your service; for it almost seems to me, now, as though I need not have been in such a hurry. I will permit myself to take a seat, if you please," she then added, parenthetically, as, with an *aplomb* that well-nigh drove the Dowager out of herself, she settled her skirts upon a low chair

near the fire, and deliberately unfastened her paletot, half removing it from her shoulders.

She made herself thoroughly at home, this insupportable woman!

"Well, what is it that you have to tell me?" broke forth the Dowager, still with more impatience than courtesy. "What has happened?"

"Are you quite certain that no one can hear? that no one will come in here?" asked Aspasia, quietly, and eyeing with immense satisfaction the vexation of her opponent.

"All my orders are given——"

"It is not always enough to give orders," suggested Mlle. de Mourjonville, provokingly.

"Mine are always executed," retorted Madame de Beauvoisin; "no one ever disobeys me," and she rapped a very precipitate tattoo upon the carved rosewood of her arm-chair, with her bony fingers. "Now that you are quite secure from all interruption, let me beg of you to acquaint me with your reasons for writing to me as you did this morning."

"To say the truth, Madame la Marquise," began the undaunted Aspasia, "I am inclined upon reflection to think I may have gone too far. As I said just now, my zeal for your interests led me away at first, and I fancied something might be done to rescue your unlucky brother; but the more I examine the situation the less it seems to me that any plan we can resort to will succeed, and my opinion now——"

"I want no one's opinion, save my own!" inter-

posed, haughtily, the Marquise; "and I have long ago told you what that is. I will not be trifled with," she continued, directing towards her wily antagonist a look of anger, that seemed to cause a secret amusement to the latter. "You had something to communicate to me, or you would not have sought this meeting so suddenly here, in my own house. I will know at once what it was."

The curiously cool and ironical look with which Mlle. de Mourjonville ventured to survey her at this moment actually cut short her phrase on the Dowager's lips. She had never met man or woman who had thus gazed at her, and she felt she had committed a mistake.

"Our interests are the same," she added, in a much softened tone; "it is obviously my right to know all that passes, in order that we may concert and advise together."

"Well," replied, dubitatively, Mlle. Aspasia; "I will tell you all of course, if you wish it; but on thinking it all well over, I incline to believe we can do no good, and I shall probably be only giving you needless annoyance. You see," (and at this entrance upon her narration our friend indulged in a sly twinkle in the corner of her malicious eyes, and a sly smile in the corner of her malicious mouth), "you see it is never altogether safe playing with fire, one does sometimes set one's neighbour's house a-blaze or one's own. I did my best to detach Madame Claudine from M. le Marquis, and to attach her to somebody else; and I

had some reason to think that my humble efforts would be crowned with success; but a week or a fortnight ago, a report crept abroad—whence it came I have never been able to find out—that M. de Nesves was so over head and ears in love with Madame that if she choose he would absolutely marry her! This report——”

But the Dowager would not allow Mlle. Aspasia to proceed. “Marry her!” she echoed with what was all but a scream of rapture. “Marry her! why that would be indeed a triumph for us! My poor brother would be for ever cured, and the duty he owes to his family and to my grandson would be performed beyond all shadow of a doubt; what a blessing!” she fervently ejaculated, laying her lean hands quite affectionately upon those of her visitor, on whose lips and eyes sat still the same mocking smile.

“Yes! no doubt, a great blessing,” repeated Mlle. de Mourjonville; “but that is not precisely what I had to say, if you had allowed me to finish my sentence. I stated that the report touching M. de Nesves, was not traceable to any one in particular, to any one whom I could make out; but it certainly found its way to your brother’s ears, and I fear has caused him——” she hesitated.

“To turn her out of his house, and cast her off before she has time to quit him!” exclaimed the Dowager with exultant hardness.

“N—o—!” drawled out Aspasia, shaking her head, and distilling her every syllable with the deepest en-

joyment of the effect she produced—"to think of marrying her himself!" and, as it were, coiling herself up into the very back of her chair, she sat watching her opponent with an internal glee that pierced through the mask of demureness imposed upon her sharp features.

The fury of the Marquise knew no bounds, and she raged, as such shut-up natures do when once they break loose. (It was only the third time in her whole life.) Mlle. de Mourjonville never took her eyes off her, and edging her chair rather nearer to the fender, seemed, in the way of personal defence, should such be needful, to have reliance upon the tongs, otherwise the scene apparently afforded her intense amusement. The Dowager walked up and down the room, stamped her foot, gnashed her teeth, glared at Mlle. Aspasia, with an expression of fierce malignity that induced the sagacious lady-in-waiting to draw several very queer conclusions in her own mind, abused her violently, and in general indulged in such intemperance of behaviour and language, as modified the notions Mlle. de Mourjonville had so frequently heard propounded upon the superiority of ladies of the world on trying occasions over women of the other sort.

But as our friend Aspasia sat motionless and mute, and merely watched the succession of outbreaks of fury which were exhibited before her, at the end of a given time these outbreaks grew less violent, and the fury having exhausted itself, the Dowager ended by coming to a halt and dropping into the chair placed before her bureau.

When silence seemed secured: "You see," began Mlle. de Mourjonville, "that my second thoughts were the right ones. I have only caused you the most perfectly useless anger and vexation by imparting to you my suspicions."

"If they had been suspicions only, you would not have thought it requisite even to acquaint me with them," interrupted Madame de Beauvoisin, fiercely.

"Well!" retorted Aspasia, with her irritating smile, "if they were more than suspicions, it was still less requisite to acquaint you with them—unless, indeed, you can point out some means of preventing M. le Marquis de Moranges from doing what he likes."

"Listen to me once and for all," broke in the outraged Dowager, "when you wrote to me this morning you had a plan—don't attempt denials, I'll not hear them—you had a plan—what was it? I tell you again I am not to be trifled with."

"Madame la Marquise," replied Aspasia, apparently quite free from the terror her opponent was accustomed to inspire, but having recourse to that frank simplicity of manner which she had already once practised upon Henri Dupont, and in the assumption of which she was first-rate, "Madame la Marquise, I am placed, or I should rather say I have placed myself, in a most awkward, indeed in a thoroughly false position. I have to appeal to your indulgence, in fact."

"Stuff! come to the point at once," growled the Dowager.

"That is just what I am doing," replied Mlle. de

Mourjonville imperturbably, "and it is precisely upon the point I am coming to that I need your indulgence; for I do feel that I acted too precipitately. I had reasons—strong ones certainly—for believing in the danger I have just pointed out to you. My first impulse was to inform you of what was being planned; I wrote my note to you last night, and after everyone was in bed, slipped out at the garden gate and posted it with my own hands. I acted upon a first impulse and——" she paused.

"Well," cried the Dowager, "what then?"

"And I was wrong," answered meekly, Aspasia.

The Dowager sprang from the chair by the bureau, and flung herself down again upon the one she had first occupied by the fire.

"Why were you wrong, I should like to know?"

"Because I calculated upon what was manifestly insufficient—I altogether mistook the situation."

"More fool you, then;" burst from the Marquise; "but pray what did you hear or see? perhaps, after all, you have been falsely alarming me?"

"What I heard was a conversation between M. le Marquis and M. de Sauveterre—I could not help overhearing it." (Aspasia did not say that she had passed a whole hour with her ear applied to the key-hole of the Marquis's study.)

"And you overheard my brother confide to that abominable old man his intention to marry this vile creature!"

"I did!"

"Good God!" exclaimed the Dowager, "what are men made of? an infamous woman of that kind! and to frustrate for her, his own family, his own flesh and blood! my grandson, his rightful heir! My brother has still a far larger fortune than I thought—I have been into all the details—he has still one hundred and fifty thousand francs a year to leave, mostly in land—one hundred and fifty thousand francs a year!" she repeated, clasping her hands almost in agony—"but it cannot be! it is monstrous, some means must be found——"

"There is the very point on which I need your indulgence, Madame la Marquise," interposed the ingenious Aspasia, "you yourself utter now the very words which I uttered to myself. I said to myself that something must be done; that it was too monstrous; there was my weakness, I avow it and implore your pardon—I was precipitate—I acted on the first impulse, and, when I came to reflect, I could in fact find out no one thing in the world that could be attempted. In reality for the something to be done I had relied upon you."

"Upon me?" retorted the Dowager with a sneer; "why, what in Heaven's name did you imagine I could do?"

"I was weak, silly—unpardonably so," repeated Mlle. de Mourjonville, "but I was so confused at first that I did not take in the position as it stands. By the time I had thought it well out I could see easily enough that there is no remedy—the thing must be

borne—there is in fact no help for it; I only saw that too late.”

Both women sat looking at each other for a considerable time in silence: the Marquise boring into Mlle. de Mourjonville's soul (if she had any) with her screw-like eyes, and Mlle. de Mourjonville opposing to that process the blank surface of a face as inscrutable as a deal board.

“One hundred and fifty thousand francs a year,” groaned the Marquise in her bitterness of spirit, “and Brunoy and Moranges and all—such things ought to be punishable by law, for their are criminal. And no help!”

“None!” repeated dismally the echo.

“He will leave her everything, of course.”

“Or to her children,” suggested the comforter opposite. “I should think M. le Marquis would be very fond of his son if he had one.”

The Dowager bounded upon her chair.

“Children!” she cried; “that woman to be the mother of my nephews! Is there no way of making him see the infamy of his conduct?”

“I do not think there is,” replied Mlle. de Mourjonville, in a somewhat modified tone; “but if there were, and if the marriage could be prevented, I could not run the risk of losing my situation at the Hôtel de Moranges for the sake of what would be insured to me as our present little convention stands—the risk——”

“If the marriage were prevented,” said the Dowager,

eagerly, "I would double the sum gladly; it is two hundred thousand francs that should be your reward."

"Alas," resumed Mlle. de Mourjonville, shaking her head; "alas, Madame la Marquise, your generosity need cost you nothing this time, for there is nothing to do. It is no use deluding ourselves; Madame Claudine will be Marquise de Moranges before a month is over—unless, indeed, providence steps in."

"Oh! providence, indeed!" echoed the Marquise, scornfully.

"Well," continued Aspasia; "one does sometimes see the most providential circumstances, to be sure."

"Yes, they may have no children," mused the Dowager; "and then he may, perhaps, not leave everything to her."

"Or she may die," added Mlle. de Mourjonville, in the most natural tone, but never taking her eye off the Dowager's face; "people do die sometimes very young, indeed."

"But she is very healthy, is she not?"

"I should say strong rather than healthy," objected the accurate Aspasia.

"Oh! poor thing," rejoined the Marquis *mère*, suddenly moved to the most unaccountable mercy and compassion towards her enemy. "One must not wish for a fellow-creature's death under any circumstances."

"Of course not," replied Mlle. de Mourjonville; "and it is no question of wishing, God forbid. I only said that one does hear sometimes of even very young persons dying suddenly."

"It is a remarkably healthy winter," propounded the Dowager.

"Remarkably so," repeated Aspasia; "though they say there are a few cases of pernicious fever about, and even of cholera."

"Sporadic," said the Marquise.

"No," said Aspasia; "Asiatic, but, indeed, for that matter, doctors say there are always cases of cholera about every year; however, as you say, Madame la Marquise, it is a wonderfully healthy season."

"Wonderfully." And when they had talked in a rather disjointed way for another ten minutes, the two women took leave of each other.

CHAPTER XX.

Two to the Rescue.

To Claire's great disappointment, the Dowager did not fulfil her promise of coming to her that evening, neither did she assign any reason for not coming. The young Marquise despatched a line to her early the next morning, reminding her that she particularly desired to see her; and the answer brought was, that the Marquis Dowager had been prevented, the night before, from going out by illness; but that she would be with her daughter-in-law immediately after breakfast.

The Dowager indisposed? Why, such a thing had never been heard of! It was not in the family annals, and Claire was plunged into an astonishment bordering on stupefaction, upon the announcement of the fact.

When her mother-in-law paid her promised visit after breakfast, there certainly were traces of the indisposition of the day before, and the pinched features and yellowed complexion of the Dowager bore witness that something had been disturbed in the usually even tenour of her health. But upon that subject she would not tolerate a single question, and tartly replied that nothing was ever the matter with her.

But when Claire broached the subject upon which she so ardently desired to consult her mother-in-law,

the latter flatly refused to have anything whatever to do with it. As to all the young Marquise's arguments about human souls, and higher duties, &c., &c., the implacable Dowager laughed them to scorn, and told Claire, moreover, that she was embarking upon a most unseemly enterprise, and that such infamous women as the Sphinx must be left to their fate, that they were invariably better treated than they deserved, and that it was the height of impropriety to meddle with them in any way whatever.

In truth, the scheming Dowager was considerably discomfited by her daughter-in-law's communication; and what she most desired was, to leave her brother in utter quietude of mind, and perfectly untormented as to the objectionable personage to whom, she felt certain, any premature or injudicious opposition would make him forthwith offer his name and fortune. She took good care not to make the remotest allusion to the information she had received the day before, touching her brother's matrimonial projects, but dwelt on the exceeding and never-to-be-sufficiently-reproved impropriety of approaching the subject of the Sphinx with M. de Moranges.

Claire, on the other hand, concealed from the Dowager any knowledge she might have had of Claudine, and all the particulars of the wretched girl's visit to Clavreuil, and of the gift of the little silver medal, which constituted the link between herself and the outcast, and seemed to impose upon her the special duty of rescuing her miserable, sinful sister from perdition.

Neither of the two made any impression upon the other; and when the Dowager made her exit, somewhat wrathfully, she left her daughter-in-law as totally without help or advice as to her contemplated campaign against M. de Moranges as she had been before.

Still Claire was determined to do what she thought right, but she certainly did not see clearly how to set about it. At one moment she thought of consulting Olivier, but a very little reflection sufficed to make her feel that it was decidedly unlikely he should take a serious interest in any woman's moral welfare, let alone such a woman as the Sphinx. After racking her brains to devise some plan, Claire resolved at last to do what, had she been older or more experienced, she would have done at first; namely, to write simply and straightforwardly to her uncle, and beg him to come and speak with her upon a matter in which she took a great interest.

The note was written and sent, and the answer brought, and M. de Moranges fixed to be with his niece the next day at one o'clock; and then Claire thoroughly understood what a difficult task she had undertaken. Then all the various objections she had heard recurred to her, clothed in tenfold strength, and she shrank from the accomplishment of what had seemed so comparatively easy. The Dowager had stigmatised the step as improper, and unbefitting a lady! And Henri Dupont had held it be of such immense difficulty that he openly avowed he knew no one who would attempt it. Then, in the face of the

act itself, the young Marquise, losing sight of all the loftier considerations which raised it to the rank of a duty, saw only the small inconveniences it entailed, and the solecisms in strict good breeding it necessarily enforced upon her. How had she dared take upon herself to meddle with her uncle's private life? He was remarkably kind and amiable to her, but there was no real intimacy between them; and nothing in all his bearing authorised her to take a liberty with him; and she was about to take, of all liberties, the greatest that could be conceived!

The young Marquise was filled with vexation at what she now called her own rashness, and would have given the world to have been able to get out of what seemed to her a tremendous scrape.

When M. de Moranges entered her drawing-room, and begged her to remark how punctual he was in obeying her summons, Claire was so embarrassed, that all trace had vanished of that self-possession for which her uncle himself had so lauded her. She spoke of several indifferent subjects, and could not, for the life of her, see her way to entering upon the one that so deeply occupied her mind. At last,—

“My dear niece,” said M. de Moranges, in the kindest tone, “you wished to speak to me of something that interests you. I hope I need not say that I am completely at your orders; do not fear to ask anything of me. It will be a pleasure to me to be of any use, or to promote any object that is of interest to you.”

The young Marquise looked down, and, blushing

all over, "It is not for me," she replied, in a low voice, "it is for you; my dear uncle, pray do not be angry with me!" and she looked beseechingly at him. "I feel what I am doing to be my duty; but it is a very hard one, and you must promise not to be angry with me; what I wish to speak to you about concerns not me, but you."

"Then all the more tell me everything unreservedly," replied the Marquis, frankly and affectionately; "be assured that I shall never be angry with you."

"Uncle," began Claire, "have you ever thought of the miserable condition of that poor girl?" She hesitated, and M. de Moranges looked as though he were miles away from comprehending what she was driving at. "I mean," she resumed, "that person who lives in your house, and whom the fashionable world has surnamed the Sphinx; have you ever thought of the misery of that poor creature?"

"It is a strange subject for your lips, my dear niece!" observed M. de Moranges, with a curious smile, and an expression of countenance by no means benevolent now; "but pray proceed; what is it you have to say to me?"

"Oh, my dear uncle!" exclaimed Claire, her courage returning with the re-awakened sense of duty; "be merciful to the unfortunate girl, think of her misery and her sin! think of her soul for ever lost, and be generous towards her! let her come back to the right road, do not stand in the way of her salvation!"

M. de Moranges laid his hand on his niece's arm,

uplifted in an attitude of entreaty, and with a very disagreeable look,—

“Claire!” interposed he, harshly; “all this is not your own doing: you are obeying the promptings of some priest.”

This restored Claire to herself.

“Upon my honour, no!” she replied, firmly; “every word I have uttered comes from the bottom of my own heart only.”

There was no doubting her for an instant. Truth was stamped upon every feature, upon every look, and all traces of embarrassment and shyness had disappeared.

“So that,” resumed M. de Moranges, “you have spontaneously, and without being put up to it by any one else” (he accentuated every word, and looked fixedly at his hearer)—

“Without being put up to it by any one, I declare to you,” repeated Claire, firmly.

“You have of your own accord,” continued the Marquis, in the same tone, “determined to penetrate into the most secret recesses of my private life, and advise me for what you naturally term my good? Claire!” added he, after a short pause, “I have never meddled with your domestic life, never felt even the slightest curiosity to know what went on behind the scenes; and that, simply because I did not think it was any business of mine, and because I hold a man’s private life to be his own exclusive property, and to

be sacred from the intrusion of no matter how near a relation."

"Uncle," said Claire, "I feel the lesson you mean to give me, but do not be angry with me if I say—I do not accept it. I do not wish to interfere with you, still less to advise you, who are so far, far wiser than I am. I merely come to you as a suppliant, and humbly implore of you to be charitable towards a fellow creature, just as I would ask you for money to help the sick or starving. Uncle! you must not be angry with me—I ask your charity. I cannot—indeed I cannot—refrain from doing what I think right;" and as, with faltering voice and tearful eyes, she uttered these last words, there was such a modest earnestness about Claire that M. de Moranges' rigidity of demeanour began partially to give way.

"You actually take, then, an interest in the person you allude to?" said he, in a gentler tone of voice; "that is very pretty of you, my niece," and he smiled.

"What must I be," retorted Claire, "if such misfortune did not touch me to the very heart?"

The Marquis got up, walked to the chimney, leant his back against it, and looked scrutinisingly, but not in displeasure, at the young Marquise.

"My dear Claire, what do you know of this person?" he asked.

She looked down somewhat disconcerted and answered, blushing,—

"What everyone in Paris knows."

"And," continued the Marquis, "that constitutes in your opinion such an amount of misery that you forthwith decide upon straining every nerve to alleviate it: don't interrupt me, pray: if we could go seriously into the question (which we cannot) there would be matter for argument without end, for we must then reason consistently, and examine the fact of the existence of the class, of the species—the mere individual is nothing. I know your point of view is the purely religious one; you are convinced that the welfare of a soul is imperilled: I—well! never mind what I think upon that subject!—I will consent to believe you perfectly sincere, and free from all clerical cant in the matter; but suppose I were to agree to what you would ask of me: what would you propose to do?"

"To rescue the poor girl at once!" exclaimed Claire.

"That is, I presume," rejoined M. de Moranges, "to make her exchange dainty fare for coarse, fine clothes for ugly ones, and more or less to shut her up in some holy place of refuge or other, where she should only hear words of sanctity, whether she were quite capable of understanding them or not. It is mostly after this fashion that this form of rescue is practised upon the sinful."

"Uncle," replied Claire, looking M. de Moranges straight in the face, "you have me at a great disadvantage, for you speak like a man of the world, and a man of experience, and I am utterly ignorant and have only my ardent goodwill. I do not brave you,

uncle, I appeal to you: why will you not help me? Think of what this poor young thing might have been—she is not twenty yet, they say: think of what she will one day be. She might have been an honest workman's wife, the mother of children who would respect and cherish her——”

“She was dying of hunger when I took her,” interrupted the Marquis impatiently.

“And how much better it would have been for her if she had died!”

“I beg your pardon, that is all nonsense, sheer nonsense, unworthy a woman of your intelligence,” retorted M. de Moranges; “she thinks herself immensely the gainer, rely upon that.”

“And you call that honest, uncle?” asked Claire, with a look that the Marquis evaded. “You gave her stones for bread, and you knew they were stones, which she did not! Uncle! uncle! why not be generous, and help me to save this girl?” and she had recourse again to her sweet touching tones and beseeching air.

M. de Moranges remained silent for several minutes, apparently working out some knotty problem in his own mind. At last,—

“My dear Claire,” said he, “what would you do to *rescue* that girl, as you call it?”

She looked up at him with her bright, pure look, and answered,—

“If she were elsewhere than where she now is, I would go to her, and speak to her as sister may speak

to sister—teach her all I could—teach her how she has sinned, and that all sin may be retrieved; but, above all, force her to feel that my own heart sorrows for her fault, and that her return to the right road would make me happy. I would try to make her feel that she is really, genuinely dear to me, as my sister in Christ.”

M. de Moranges looked with admiration at his beautiful niece, whose whole countenance glowed with the purest and most holy enthusiasm.

“You are a sweet, dear girl, Claire,” said he, almost fondly; “and you do truly love your neighbour, but there, alas, lies the whole mistake. The sinful, as you call them, may sometimes be impressed by strong individual affection—earthly affection—which is what you cannot give; and what you can give, namely, the Christian love for the fellow creature, for the abstract neighbour, does not touch them.”

The young Marquise looked discouraged, for she felt there was truth at the bottom of this remark.

“You are so genuinely charitable, my dear niece,” continued the Marquis; “that I will confide to you what I have not yet told to the principal person concerned; I, too, have a plan of my own for rescuing this unfortunate girl, as you choose to consider her” (Claire raised her eyes full of gladness to her uncle’s face); “I will place her in a condition to retrieve utterly what appears to you as her sin; I am absolutely independent, and have the right to do whatever I like;

my intention is to rescue this girl in a way none of you dream of—my intention is to marry her.”

“Oh, uncle, how can you joke upon such a subject?” cried the young Marquise, with a half-terrified, half reproachful expression, but at the same time turning very pale.

“Joke, Claire!” he echoed; “in that word you unwittingly expose your whole weakness. You don’t admit even the possibility of such a project as mine, and you talk of rescuing people!” he added, almost scornfully.

“I do,” rejoined the Marquise, proudly; “my desire is to rescue, not to recompense; I would not reward anyone for the evil done, but I would prove that all sin can be atoned for by repentance.”

“No, my dear niece,” interposed the Marquis; you deceive yourself, you are like all those of your kind; so long as the salvation of the sinner is to be secured by his punishment, you go heart and soul into the business, but the instant the sinner’s salvation is to be achieved pleasantly, you’ll none of it; you are all alike, you devotees.”

“I am not a devotee, uncle,” retorted warmly Claire; “I believe in God with my whole soul, and trust in Him and love Him with my whole soul; and I believe in good, and don’t believe that right and wrong are all one; I believe in duty, and am convinced that our duty is always to do more than we can do, and never to think of ourselves: but to reward wrong-doing is wrong, uncle. Sacrifice is the law of our life.”

"And plenty of it we get," replied M. de Moranges, smiling at his niece's animation; "we're always making sacrifices, whether we will or not—always having to forego something we like. It is just that which makes life such a mistake—such a blank," he added, in a somewhat different tone. "As to me, I'm tired of it, and mean to try whether domestic comfort is better worth: if you were consistent you ought to approve me."

"Approve you!" retorted Claire; "what! for giving the most deplorable example?"

"My dear child," rejoined the Marquis, gravely; "who gives good examples nowadays? look around you and tell me; your so-called good examples are mere negations, abstentions from absolute evil sometimes, but active, energetic good—never. No, my dear niece, even you are not, at this moment, acting up to what you regard as your principles; you are obeying the narrowest and most hackneyed of prejudices." (Claire started.) "Yes; and obeying it because it is the most hackneyed, and that you have been born and will die within the perpetual hearing of it. It is not because you think I do wrong in marrying a sinful person (whose sin, mark you, if I took up your side of the argument, I should say I alone provoked), it is not for that, my dear child, it is because that sinful person is not of a condition in which I ought to choose a wife. Look around you, at the women everybody receives, and at the scandals everybody forgets: nay, for that matter, look close at

home, at that woman who ran away with poor Lancour, your own cousin; I was told yesterday that Mottefort had actually taken her back; before a year is out, I shall hear you all calling her poor Madame Mottefort, and celebrating her Christian repentance and her husband's Christian mercy, yet I defy you to think better of her than of the dreadful woman whom I mean to marry."

"Uncle," responded Claire, very gently; "I say again that I do not know how to argue with you, but I feel deeply—oh, uncle, indeed, I feel at the very bottom of my heart, that it is wrong to reward sin."

"May be," rejoined the Marquis; "but set your mind at ease on that point; be quite certain that Providence will be on the best possible terms with Madame la Marquise de Moranges, who will do a world of good in her parish. She will not have the *entrée* into your salons, but cardinals and archbishops, and the highest dignitaries of the Church, will bow down before her, and call her a saint whenever she chooses, rely upon that."

"Uncle," said Claire, after a pause of a few seconds, very disconsolately, "I meant to do good, and I have done none. You and I cannot discuss, for we don't speak the same language; but still I must always say I feel—nay, I know that I am right, though I cannot prove it to you."

"My dear child," answered the Marquis, with an expression almost of tenderness, "you and I shall be always good friends, for you are thoroughly sincere and really wish to devote yourself to others; but you

are too young to know the difference between honesty and piety, and between morality and prejudice; you are confused and, in fact, prejudice has the upper hand; this is as it should be for the present, only don't be led away by your zeal for other people's souls into interfering with their private life; let each man go his own way, whether it lead him to Paradise or elsewhere, that's the advice of a man of the world."

"But one's conscience," objected, timidly, Claire.

"Has enough to do with one's own conduct," retorted her uncle, "without meddling with one's neighbour. And now, my dear Claire, I will not, with you, play the hypocrite, for one instant, but tell you the whole truth at the risk of shocking all your opinions. In marrying the person we have spoken of, I am not thinking of her rescue, but of my own convenience. I have upon her guilt and my wrong very different notions from yours, and I marry her because it suits me to do so."

"The young Marquise shook her head in silence, and looked at her uncle with eyes full of tears.

"Don't grieve over me," he added, smiling, but serious, in spite of himself, "I am merely a man of the world, whose experience of life has not hitherto been altogether satisfactory. But whatever comes, I remain your firm friend, my dear niece. Count upon me at all hours—only apply to me, mind, for what interests you, not for what concerns myself; leave my interests to my own care."

Claire had certainly failed with her uncle.

CHAPTER XXI.

The Proposal.

AND, in reality, what had led M. de Moranges to this extraordinary determination of his to marry the Sphinx? It would be very difficult to say; men's wilfullest acts resulting mostly from a combination of various small causes, and seldom from any one important motive.

M. de Moranges was, as the reader scarcely requires to be told, a thoroughly selfish man, that term not being meant to imply any particular degree of wickedness, but simply what it states, namely, the habit of thinking of self. M. de Moranges' whole life had been lived with a view to himself alone, and exclusive of the interests, or opinions, or pleasures, or comforts of other people. He did not take other people into account, not because he disliked or despised them (there never had been anything misanthropic about him), but because he overlooked them, otherwise than as instruments conducive to his comforts, his pleasures, or his interests. He had led, as has been mentioned, a very kingly life, having been famed, submitted to, flattered, and highly considered, for reasons exclusive of any moral merit, and it was natural enough that he should conceive himself privileged to do whatever might be

found agreeable without reference to what the so-called world might say or think upon the subject.

He had not married in early life for several reasons; firstly, as has been noted, he had from his boyish days been so much loved by so many women that he lacked the opportunity for choosing one who should be ostensibly the partner of his existence; secondly, he found he could have all the advantages of matrimony without any of its thralldom, and that the world only craved for admittance inside his doors; thirdly, he was by nature despotic, disliking discussion, and having in common with his sister the love of dominion; and fourthly, he was, intellectually speaking, self-sufficing, and abstractions could fill what he termed his heart far more than could human beings. He loved the beautiful in everything, and the grand and the complete—loved them sincerely—worshipped excellence everywhere, whether in politics, art, industry, or what not, and this it was which chiefly kept him aloof from mere ordinary affection, and from the problematic pastime entitled falling in love.

But at fifty-five M. de Moranges felt lonely, and around him was a void, which the mere aspect of the beautiful in no matter how many forms could not fill up. The sterility of his beauty-worship became clear (though not to him), for he was possessed only of a shadow, and created not.

A great warrior, a great statesman, a great poet may vanquish love, for he espouses ambition, is a creator, and throws himself forth in deeds, peopling coming

ages with his heirs; but the mere admirer of other's greatness, the mere lover of the unpossessed beautiful, comes at some time or other to see his need, and wearies over his solitude upon earth.

M. de Moranges had come to this when he resolved to take to himself Claude Raynal's daughter, and bring her up, and fashion her to his hand. That was a matter of whim, and soon came to an end. Then the Sphinx, having achieved repute, was transformed into the centre of a circle, and the surroundings whereof she was the motive, beguiled the hour for a time, and charmed vanity. When that was beginning to die out, something awoke in the Sphinx herself, which compelled her master without his or her knowledge.

It was the Unknown before which he involuntarily bent; it was the Truth that thrilled through him, though it merely touched him as he passed by.

What had inspired Claudine? By what enchantment had she been suddenly transformed? She had been a statue, she was a living woman—where was Pygmalion?

The Marquis's perceptions were much too fine for him not to recognise the change the instant it occurred; but the cause? the cause? He sought for it vainly, and then seized upon a false one. That mattered little, for the work was done by the false cause every bit as surely as it would have been by the true one. M. de Moranges was torn asunder from himself, forced into occupying himself with another, and his faith in himself was shaken. He was fifty-five, the

magnificent Marquis, and the Sphinx, of whose possession he had grown proud, could love—but loved not him.

She, in whose atmosphere he felt now an indescribable fascination, was to him still the statue: he was not Pygmalion.

Then jealousy tortured him, and he thought it was too late. But reassured by Olivier, and persuaded of Claudine's *de facto* fidelity, the Marquis clutched at one of those impossible hopes, which madden by their very impossibility. It had been said that the rival he feared would, in order to win the Sphinx, wed her. It was only a word, a suggestion, a thing he would, had he been in his senses, have laughed to scorn; but he was not in his senses, and the seed of suggestion had sunk into a kindred soil, and had sprouted forth into a goodly tree.

What if he were to marry her himself? why not? Another had been reputed ready to do so—why not he? and then he thought of the artist-like pleasure of developing this primitive nature, and of how she must naturally worship the benefactor he should prove himself to be! He would now watch the melting of the marble into flesh for him, Pygmalion? These were among the ancients' god-like joys, Pygmalion, indeed! what did he say? he was Jupiter, and she Semele and he grew lighter and younger as he thought that happiness was there at his feet, waiting to be picked up if he would only stoop.

Well, he would stoop; and having taken that re-

solve, he would, according to his nature, seek perfection in what he did, and would so overwhelm this unfortunate, as they styled her, with his condescension, that she should, Semele-like, be consumed by the blaze of radiance cast upon her.

The very day after acquainting his niece with his new project, the Marquis decided upon imparting to Claudine the brilliant fate for which she was reserved, and accordingly he sought her in the library of the Hôtel de Moranges, the windows of which opened upon a conservatory filled with strongly-perfumed plants.

But between our dreams and our acts, and between our surest hopes and their fulfilment, there lies so wide a chasm, that M. de Moranges hesitated to take the handle of the door in his hand—his heart, yes! actually his heart beat strongly; and when by dint of will he entered that room, it was very much as any other humbler lover would, who, at fifty-five, might after all be refused by the low-born she to whom he offered his hand.

Refused? No! not as the word is used every day—not that; he knew that would not be; but he wanted more now, and she might accept him yet refuse herself: there lay the possible failure, and that he dreaded. But it was but a passing alarm—reasonably speaking, the Marquis felt sure of the event.

Claudine was seated by the fire, wrapped in dark purple velvet and sables. She was always chilly, circulation with her being slow; she had been trying to

learn how to net purses with chenille and gold beads, and was clumsily labouring to make her pale fingers obey the example of Mademoiselle Aspasia's nimbler ones, when the door opened.

On the entrance of the Marquis both the women rose, a quantity of chenille and strings of gold beads fell from Claudine's lap, and the amiable Aspasia set herself to the task of picking them up from the carpet, during which operation she, unobserved, took a careful view of her employer's face.

In a few seconds all that had fallen down was neatly placed upon a table, and Mademoiselle de Mourjonville, with a modest respectful air, asked whether, if she were not particularly wanted, she might petition for an hour's freedom to answer a rather pressing letter from home. Claudine looked as though she would rather she had remained, but the permission was granted by M. de Moranges with the blandest promptitude, and, as she retired from the library, letting an unseen glance linger over the pair she left behind, she knew as well upon what errand the Marquis had come as if he had imparted to her all the details of his plan.

Claudine was embarrassed, and settled herself upright upon her chair, as she conceived it was the practice of fine ladies to do, but she did not know how to hold her hands, and sought for the gloves which she thought it would have been proper to have on. Nothing had ever been able to cure her of her innate dread of the Marquis, who, on his side, sat surveying

her with that tender benignity which very vain-glorious men feel (beyond their betters) for any individual upon whom they are about to confer some royal bounty.

"Claudine," said he, with a smile, "do you remember at one time being so extremely anxious to be called Madame de Savaray? it is many months ago, but you seemed remarkably anxious. Do you remember?"

"I think I do," she stammered, with evident confusion; "but I assure you, Monsieur le Marquis, I have never, since then, never——"

"I am not reproaching you," interposed M. de Moranges, gently; "but I want you to tell me why you made that request? what was your particular reason?"

"I am sure I don't know," replied the unlucky Sphinx, colouring deeply, and fidgeting about with her fingers (she would have been so glad if Aspasia had been there, Aspasia always knew exactly what to say); "I am so afraid you would laugh at me, or be very angry if I were to tell you why," she added in a lower tone.

"I entreat of you to do so," persisted M. de Moranges, with so much kindness that Claudine took courage.

"Well, then," she murmured, "it was because I thought it would make a lady of me."

"And you have a strong desire to be made a lady of?" rejoined the Marquis, "is that so, eh?"

"Is it wrong?" she asked hurriedly, and looking frightened again.

"Quite the reverse." And there was silence for some seconds, M. de Moranges feeling thoroughly reassured now as to his own prospects, and gazing at the fire with serene satisfaction, whilst he dallied with the coils of his watch chain.

"So that it would really afford you an unmistakable pleasure if I were to authorise you to call yourself Madame la Baronne de Savaray, and enjoin upon my whole establishment to know you by that name."

"Oh, Monsieur le Marquis! Monsieur le Marquis!" exclaimed Claudine, clasping her hands in delight, and throwing herself back in her chair.

She was very beautiful, thus, and in the sudden glow of pleasure which spread all over her, flushing her cheek, kindling her eye, and animating her with warm quick life, M. de Moranges thought he seized ample promise of the statue's transformation.

"It is a cheap boon to confer upon a person to whom one is attached," said he, graciously.

"For certain, certain," urged the Sphinx, timidly, "Monsieur le Marquis is not mocking me?"

"Why should I do so?" rejoined he. "I am able to refuse; I am to be trusted when I grant;" and with those words he rose from his seat, went to the conservatory, and gathered a bunch of stephanotis, which he brought back to the Sphinx, who was now standing staring at herself in the glass, as though in her childish

joy to make sure that it was her own identical self who had just achieved what she for the moment most longed for.

"That flower," observed M. de Moranges, laying the branch of *stephanotis* on Claudine's fair hair, "is like the satin of your skin; not at this moment," he continued, with a smile, "for you are as red as the scarlet passion-flower there on the wall. I am truly rejoiced at the pleasure I have been able to give you."

"Oh! indeed, indeed. I am the happiest woman in the world," cried the Sphinx, with an exultation she could not master.

The Marquis came nearer to her, and took her hand.

"Claudine," he said, in an almost serious tone, "have you not reflected that there is something beyond being Madame de Savaray?"

"What?" she asked, wonderingly.

"Those who are Barons of Savaray are Marquises of Moranges too," he resumed.

"Yes, I know it is the title of your house," answered the girl, "and that if you did not choose, I could not bear it, and I am so grateful;" and she looked at him now with an expression of intense delight.

"But I might choose to give you more than the name of Savary," remarked M. de Moranges.

"I can imagine nothing more."

"I might give you that of Moranges," he added,

in a lower tone, and with an undeniable and uncontrollable beating of the heart.

"No," retorted she, humbly, "that would not be right—that is the name you bear yourself."

"And that we can bear together," he added, with a look of princely fondness and condescension.

"How?" she asked, wonderingly.

"By my making you my wife, Claudine," was the reply. "My mind is made up; I will marry you, and make you Marquise de Moranges."

The Sphinx turned deadly pale, and shrinking from the arms opened to receive her,—

"Marry me?" she repeated, in a tone of dismay.

"It is my firm resolve," said M. de Moranges; "do not be alarmed, my dear child, or fancy I am trifling with you. I know my own mind, and have well reflected upon what I am doing. The world may cavil at my conduct, but you will in three weeks hence be Madame de Moranges, and soon get used to your new position, which naturally overpowers you at first."

She had slipped from the embrace in which he meant to fold her, and bending down low, with her old submissive air, brought her lips to bear upon his hand, and meekly kissed it.

The Marquis's first impulse towards the crouching form before him was one of compassionate superiority; he patted her head as he would have patted a pet spaniel. But it was evident that his way of divulging his intentions with regard to the Sphinx must have been too sudden. He had perfectly crushed her.

She might be annihilated by the honour done to her; but somehow M. de Moranges did not feel at all that he had played the part of Pygmalion to his own satisfaction, still less that of Jupiter.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Sphinx's mind, as has been noted all along, was in a most chaotic condition—full of odd imaginings, and dark, because no pains had been taken to enlighten it. It is certain that the announcement to her by the Marquis of his intention to marry her had dismayed her beyond words, and caused her as much grief as fear. She so feared M. de Moranges, that the idea of resistance did not occur to her; but her dim perceptions pointed to the tremendous honour conferred upon her by the immutable decree which separated her from Olivier. In her ethics, so long as she remained in the place she now occupied, she might achieve all the ends of gratitude (and do not forget gratitude was her religion) by concealment. She had a right as she thought, to dispose of herself, so long as it was impossible that he to whom she owed so much, could guess at what passed. She did not look upon this as betraying M. de Moranges; whereas, to the lawful wife, to the married woman, married before the Maire, with his heart on, and the cure at the altar, it really did seem to her that everything was forbidden. She believed, this ignorant creature, in the majesty of the institution marriage, as in the majesty of kings and

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The dark Shadow passes away.

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emperors, and was in that respect better than her betters. It was all such a hopeless confusion in the ill-taught girl's brain; ill-taught even more than untaught. Slow-witted, and inheriting the lazy, dependent father's indolent subaltern nature, nothing in the education she had received had ever shown her the severe, unmistakeable outlines of what was right and what was wrong. She had heard so much about the blind submission to all authorities, that, had she been capable of conceiving the idea of uprightness on her own account, it would have seemed to her almost presumptuous. And herein lies the one great defect of all merely clerical education (whether Catholic or Protestant matters not, so long as it be exclusively clerical), namely, that it does not sufficient honour to God's creature, and neglects to produce in him the recognition and respect of his own possible integrity.

And so it had been with Claude Raynal's daughter; like so many in the mass of these wretched victims, she knew not the difference between truth and falsehood, or dishonesty and honesty, though she was warranted "taught," and could repeat her catechism from beginning to end.

Well then, though nothing stood upright in this ill-trained mind of Claudine's she had a superstition about real *bonâ fide* married women; and she regarded marriage in the upper classes as a kind of temple, into which, when a woman was admitted, she was forced to conform to the strictest regulations and rules.

The idea then of becoming the Marquise de Mo-

ranges, the married wife of her benefactor, was to the Sphinx an idea full of terror and misery. But what to do? She had the slave-attributes inherent to so many of her species (not more peculiar to the Eastern than to the Western female, if you give no better education to the Christian than to the Mussulman girl), and she would sooner have thought of throwing herself out of the window, than of opposing the will of the master to whom, too, she owed everything.

In her agitation she naturally sought Mlle. Aspasia, and confided to her the trouble she was in; but that over-enlightened person immediately undertook to set all her scruples at rest, and, above all, left upon Claudine the impression that no one desired her lawful union with the Marquis so much as she did. Nay, she went so far in the rose-coloured projects of all kinds that she invented for the future, that she actually begged of the Sphinx, when once she should be enthroned in her high estate as Madame la Marquise, to remember her humble companion, and put her above want. It was clear to Claudine's comprehension that Mlle. de Mourjonville's interest lay in this marriage; and she was soon persuaded by her friend, who knew all about what went on in the world, that her being transformed into M. de Beauvoisin's aunt, did just the reverse of separating her from her husband's nephew.

She quickly got used in this way to the notion of becoming a lady, and actually a married one, though it still seemed strange to her that there should be so

little difference between the customs of the higher and the lower classes.

"It is the money that makes the difference, and the way of doing things," had assured Mlle. Aspasia; and Claudine grew to believe her.

Claire meanwhile, who had a genuine horror of all tittle-tattle, instead of making the Marquis's matrimonial plans a subject for confidential gossip with her mother, did this time think it right to speak seriously to her husband of what was impending, thereby involuntarily placing him in the most awkward position imaginable. In reality he was bound hand and foot, as far as his uncle and the Sphiux were concerned, and felt that whenever it might please either of these two to inform him of the contemplated union, he was condemned to express his entire approbation in the most unqualified terms. With Claire, however, he gave himself the pleasure of treating M. de Moranges' conduct with unmitigated censure, only protesting that no remonstrance was practicable, and that their dignity, as his uncle's next heirs, imposed silence upon them as a rigorous duty. Further than this he would not go, but his animadversion upon the folly and immorality of his uncle was loud and strong, and so far satisfactory.

And then, as in every emergency of her life, the young Marquise had recourse to Madame Beaudouin, but for the first time the aunt and niece seemed to see matters from a different point of view.

The moment Claire confided to Madame Beaudouin what M. de Moranges was about to do, and the injury

which, according to her, he would commit against struggling virtue by thus rewarding frailty, Aunt Clementine understood what it was the Marquis had alluded to in his recent conversation with her, and though she acknowledged he had told her truly when he told her she could not defend him, she showed herself unwilling to be otherwise than lenient. She saw mentally before her the altered face of the Marquis, and guessed at much which he would have died sooner than avow to mortal man.

Aunt Clementine's life was really and definitely settled—she knew what lay before her, was secure from surprise, and as has been already said, saw things as from a great distance, and (unless in the case of such heartlessness as Berthe's) things mostly appeared to her too small to be taken into serious notice. Claire, on the contrary, in spite of her great sorrow, was entering on untried years and rife unwittingly with all the curiosities of life. She could wonder still, and admire or be dismayed where her aunt would be merely patiently contemplative.

"How poor and insufficient your uncle must have found life, to have recourse, when its larger half is over, to such a step!" observed Madame Beaudouin. "He is sadly to be pitied!"

"He is terribly to be blamed!" retorted the young Marquise.

"My own Claire," was her aunt's rejoinder, with a shake of the head, "to blame one must know; we know nothing in this case. Suppose M. de Moranges loves

this poor wretched girl? if he does, he will surely let no one discover it."

"Loves?" echoed Claire, in amaze. "My uncle! my uncle, after the life he has led! it is impossible."

"The mysteries of the human heart are so incrut-able where love is concerned, and lie so deep," replied her aunt, gently, "that perhaps each mystery has but its own individual discoverer. I am inclined almost to believe that none among us has ever penetrated the mystery of his neighbour's heart; but we can pity. I do pity your uncle sincerely."

Claire was surprised beyond measure.

"I cannot understand you, aunt!" she exclaimed.

"It is impossible that you should, darling," responded Madame Beaudouin, stroking her niece's fair hair as it lay back from her pure, blue-veined temples; "your youth fights against my experience, as it should do. Youth is glorious, never just; it may be full of fire and energy, and devotion, and truth, but it is not natural that it should be indulgent."

"But, aunt, you are indeed unjust. I would have rescued that poor girl—I told my uncle so—I would have saved, and comforted, and amended her, and have provided for her. I pity her, poor creature, from my soul."

"Yes, my own Claire, because you understand her misery and her needs; and you don't pity him, because you don't understand his. A man whose pride in his own superiority has sufficed him all his life, who has lived with himself alone, despising what men

call love, and who at fifty-five seeks in a marriage with his mistress an escape—! From what? That, we know not, but it must be something hard to bear. And again, I say, suppose he loves her! Think of *that* torture, Claire; and to such a man as your uncle, used from his earliest years to look down upon those who loved, and who allowed their hearts to get the better of them.”

And so they talked on, and Claire, when she left Madame Beaudouin, did not understand any better than when she came why her uncle's determination to marry the Sphinx might imply that his entire life had been a failure.

As she passed through the vestibule to reach her carriage, she met a footman of her mother's coming in all haste to bring her a note. The man said he had been to the Hôtel de Beauvoisin, and had followed her on here.

The note, in a few hurried words, entreated the young Marquise to come instantly to her mother's house.

“I have such news to give you,” said Madame de Clavreuil; “come quick—such a joy! such a surprise!”

In the face of whatever the event might be could thus animate her usually calm mother, Claire simply felt how indifferent all surprises, however joyful, must leave her. She said she would come immediately; got into her carriage, and drove to Madame de Clavreuil's, unmoved by any expectation or any hope.

She had hardly crossed the threshold of the ante-room, however, when her mother rushed from the neighbouring *salon*, seized her hand, and dragging her back through the drawing-room into her own boudoir, indulged in an uninterrupted series of expressions of delight.

"Oh, Claire, dear, what a happiness!" she exclaimed. "He will be here in Paris in a few days; he is perfectly well—quite recovered from his wounds. It is he whom the governor-general sends with the official report of the whole—there is his letter."

"Whose letter?" asked Claire, staring at her mother, who snatched an open letter from a table, and held it out to her.

"Victor's! dear, dear Victor's; whose else should it be?" rejoined Madame de Clavreuil.

"Are you mocking me, mother?" asked Claire, turning white as a marble statue, "or are you out of your senses? What horrible fable is this? What ghastly jesting with the dead!"

"But there are no dead, my dearest child," repeated her mother, energetically. "If we read the papers regularly, as, indeed, I fancied you did, though I do not," (Claire had never looked at a newspaper since the fatal day which had brought the news of M. de Lancour's death,) "we should not be so taken aback by the news; for it seems that for the last week it has been known that in that dreadful engagement where Victor was said to have been killed, the Kabyles had made several prisoners, and had, as was supposed, in

their possession two or three French officers and eighteen or twenty men. Some mountain fort (I forget its name) was taken quite lately, and the French prisoners all rescued save one, a lieutenant of the line, who had died. Victor was among the number. This was only known by telegram last night, and this morning your father got Victor's own letter, briefly stating how he had escaped."

"Victor is not dead!" repeated the young Marquise, in a low tone, and almost mechanically, as she sat looking vacantly straight before her—"not dead!" and her pale lips quivered.

"I tell you, dear child, there is his letter, his own handwriting—read it," and Madame de Clavreuil put the sheet of paper into Claire's passive hand; "or rather," she pursued, "let me read it to you," and she forthwith proceeded to read what Victor had written to his uncle. It was a short, pithy account—a thoroughly military bulletin of what had occurred. He had been left for dead on the field of battle, had passed six weeks a prisoner among the Kabyles, who cured his wounds, and took excellent care of him, and when the fort was stormed, he had helped to make better terms for the chiefs. He had been sent by the commander of his last successful expedition down to Algiers straight, and he was under orders to start for Paris in a few days. The letter was a mere report, contained as few words as possible, and not one single allusion to self that was not strictly necessary.

While Madame de Clavreuil was reading her

nephew's missive, Claire was staring fixedly at certain objects which recalled to her mind painful thoughts of the past. There, in that very room, it was that, two years back, she had implored her mother to take pity on her; there, by the fire-place, was, even now, the low arm-chair on which her mother sat when she, kneeling beside her, besought her to shield her from a marriage with Olivier. It was all the same—all! And her mother, too, was unchanged—still the same pattern of narrow, negative amiability that flies with unerring instinct from all greatness—the daughter who had blamed her father's patriotism, shrunk from her brother's fame, sacrificed her child to empty custom, and was marching onwards through life, persuaded that whether duty were hard or not she had done hers.

And Victor was alive!

Had Victor been really dead, Claire could have forgiven all, for was not all one to her in life? And whether she eked out her days as Olivier's wife or not mattered nothing. But Victor living, and free, now!—That rushed across Claire's numbed heart with a force that made its rebound one of absolute fierceness. There was something more hopeless for her than even Victor's death—and to that she had been lightly, foolishly sentenced by her mother.

Claire rose before Madame de Clavreuil had finished the last words of the letter, and put down her veil, feeling she did not wish the expression of her face to be seen. Calm she was not, nor collected, but she had been striving for the last minute or two to collect

her scattered senses, and she craved to be once more alone.

"You can't be going already, Claire?" urged her mother.

"I must go," rejoined the young Marquise, hoarsely, and in a way that silenced objection; and, opening the door, she hurriedly left the room, flying chiefly from the intolerable oppression of her own misery.

As to Madame de Clavreuil, she despaired of ever understanding the strange inequalities of temper she had noticed in her daughter for the last six months. There, evidently, was in the atmosphere of the age something which made young women inexplicable and intolerable.

When Claire was once more alone and hidden from view in the corner of her own carriage, she gave way, and, for the first time, acknowledged to herself that a burthen had now been laid upon her which it was beyond her strength to bear. She had borne the news of Victor's death, but Victor's life and freedom, and love!—she shuddered before all this, and felt miserably helpless.

"Oh, mother, mother!" she cried, stifling her sobs in the cushions of the carriage; "how could you do it?—how could you condemn me to it?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

The unexpected Return.

Love, thou art bitter, sweet is Death. — TENNYSON.

It is the immutable law of our being that nothing remains absolutely stationary in us, but is for ever being transformed, moving onwards towards increase or towards decay. And thus it had been with Claire. To be loved by Victor had been denied to her, and, therefore, when she knew herself beloved by him, the joy of that consciousness so elated her that her spirit, rising into a heaven of its own, soared high above all earthly griefs and crosses.

Separation, even, scarcely hurt at the time, for it was not believed that hearts so purely joined could separate. Then, as the love grew, death came, and hallowed it—made it sacred. But pure and holy though it was, that love of Claire's for Victor, its growth had been giant-strong, no barriers having been set to the worship for the dead; it had well-nigh absorbed everything else around it; and Claire, unsuspecting of evil, had lived so wrapt up in the memory of her lost love that whatever else was, in life, was either subservient to this one sentiment, or took its aspect from it. The complete sense of what her love for her dead cousin had grown to, only burst upon

Claire when the sudden news came that her cousin still lived.

Then, indeed, a storm began to rage within her heart, and, at the outset, she well-nigh gave herself up to despair. Had she not been taught to believe devoutly that self-murder was a crime, she would have seen at once an issue from her pain; for Claire was of a dauntless nature, and would have chosen death resolutely sooner than have descended one step in her own and M. de Lancour's esteem. But death was forbidden her. She must live on through all the dreary days and hours that God had appointed for her; and she must do her duty, and be true to herself, and, though parched with thirst, she must go on living now within view of the divine draught, which must never touch her lips, towards which she must never stretch out her hand. Had she loved Victor less, she might have more promptly rejoiced in his escape; but she so thoroughly loved him, that she confidently waited for the moment when she should join him for ever—it could not be long—a few years, more or less; and what were years to her? But now she must struggle for honour and duty's sake—struggle against possible weakness. And what if he should mistake her!—if he should imagine her love had decreased!

At that thought she would clasp her hands with terror, crying aloud for mercy and to be spared that torture, for she did not know whether she could bear it.

Poor Claire! the sacred security of her love was gone, its brightness was dimmed, its integrity impaired.

From heavenly, that it had been, it had become earthly now and troubled.

Everything too combined to unsteady her mind, and make peace impossible. Even Olivier, who had it not in his power to do aught for her happiness, could yet contribute largely to her disquietude. She was, above all things, generous and self-devoted, and disposed naturally to think she had not given away sufficiently of her own self to other people. Now Olivier's joy at Victor's escape had been something so loud and strong and genuine that his wife was painfully touched by it, and examining her own heart could not choose but feel a strange sort of pity for her husband.

It was the kind of commiseration you feel for a person sick unto death, and who accepts the doctor's assurances that he is not going to die, or for the confiding rapture of a child who trusts in the promise of some pleasure which you know is not to be fulfilled. Olivier was, God knows! not wronged (nor ever would be; Claire must die before that!)—but he was deceived, and do what she would she could not help it. Could Olivier look into his wife's heart, she said to herself that he would not so rapturously rejoice over the escape from death of the man whose image, let her struggle as she might, lay for ever engraved at the bottom of that heart. This great big foolish fellow, heavy-witted, dull-brained, was the most inoffensive of mortals, kindly-hearted too—and her husband. There was little or none of his fault in their ill-assorted union; perhaps if she had asked him point blank to deliver her from a

marriage with him, he would have helped her; but she had consented, and this man's honour had been confided to her keeping. Claire was too high and too delicately minded a woman to look upon her entire obligation as discharged because materially that honour was safely guarded, and the unbounded trust implied by Olivier's delight at M. de Lancour's escape invested him in Claire's eyes with an indescribable interest. He reminded her of a passage in German history which had deeply impressed her childhood; of that poor, ignorant lumbering hero, Otto of Wittelsbach, who set out bearing to the King of Poland a letter from his friend the Emperor Philip, in which, counting upon Otto's inability to read, the Kaiser abused him, and recommended his brother potentate to throw him into prison! Olivier, in Claire's esteem, was exhibiting just this sort of brute-like trust, and his innocence and ignorance wounded her to the core.

Olivier, on his side, could talk and think of nothing but Victor, for whom his admiration had always been profound. The one only career he had longed for was the career of arms, which had been forbidden him; and as envy was utterly foreign to his nature, he had sincerely enjoyed Lancour's renown, and revelled in the military distinction Lancour had achieved as if he himself had won it.

When Victor was known to have actually returned to France, to be in Paris, M. de Beauvoisin knew no peace but in putting himself incessantly in pursuit of him. For several days Victor contrived to elude

Olivier's reiterated invitations to the Hôtel de Beauvoisin; but he could not always do so without exciting suspicion, so he one day consented to be one of Olivier's guests at a dinner of thirty people, given by the latter in his honour. Claire and her cousin met, but, the first greetings over, neither spoke to the other, and no one upon this occasion noted the mutual avoidance between these two.

During the days that followed; the young Marquise altered the whole tenor of her life. Instead of the quiet, fireside habits for which, since her return to Paris, she had been remarkable, she plunged into every vortex of fashionable life, leaving no *fête* of any kind unfrequented. She was determined that her cousin should find no opportunity of seeing her alone in her own home, and, therefore, she fled that home at all hours; but she yearned for the sight of Victor, and eagerly sought the crowds through which he passed, and in which she could see him pass at a distance, too far for the exchange of word or look.

The pure, holy union with him she loved was dissolved; she was no longer his, nor he hers; but she might see him—there could be no harm in that.

"Put off your mourning, Claire," had said, boisterously glad, Olivier, and Claire did put her mourning off; but it seemed to her, while she did so, as if she were laying aside her wedding gear. She would let no one touch her sable garments, but only herself, and with her own hands she put away and locked out of sight the

vestments that, to her, were rather bridal than funeral ones.

One night, about ten days after M. de Lancour's return (it was now the middle of March), Claire went to a ball at the Russian Embassy. It was late, and the young Marquise left the ball-room, and went to seek her husband in the other salons. When she found him, he begged her to wait a quarter of an hour, as he had some one to speak to particularly, at the end of which time he said he would fetch her, and accompany her home. The young Marquise tried to persuade her husband, whenever she could, now, to go with her into the world, and sometimes succeeded; and he was never otherwise than flattered by the admiration she invariably excited.

On the night in question, Claire retired into one of the smaller salons, and took a seat upon a low divan, right under an enormous stand of flowers. These flowers, in reality, filled up an archway, through which, in ordinary times, you passed from a long, wide gallery, into the contiguous apartments. As it was, the flowers rose so high that they completely masked the opening under the arch, and the persons sitting on the ottomans in either chamber were, in fact, sitting back to back, and quite close, without being aware of each other's presence.

Claire rested her head wearily against the wall, and congratulated herself upon the fact of no one being in the room to disturb her. On the other side, in the

gallery, several persons were talking together, but she did not attend to their conversation.

Suddenly a very few words were uttered which caused the young Marquise to start, and to blush all over. The words were insignificant, but the voice!

"No, Excellency; I could not accustom myself to that. What I like in the service is the perpetual action."

Those were the words. There was nothing in them; but it was Victor's voice, and Claire listened.

In gruff tones was replied,—

"You don't know what you're saying. When a man has attained at an early age, as you have done, to superior rank, he may aspire to anything; but he must not allow himself to be forgotten—he must keep as much as possible within the sphere where men's fortunes are made. Your place, Lancour, is in Paris."

"May be," was rejoined, in Victor's voice; "but you see, Monsieur le Maréchal, I aspire to nothing save activity. I can take the fact of being forgotten quite easily, and care not the least for making my fortune. I love the service; but, as to staying in Paris, sooner than remain there one hour beyond what is indispensable, I would absolutely retire from the army."

"S——!" thundered out the gruff tones again; "what an incurable original! Why, you must have taken leave of your senses! Don't you see that war on a grand scale is preparing—is inevitable? Not war with a pack of savages, but real, genuine war—such as our fathers had to tell of; and who is there,

then, that wouldn't be ambitious? Death of my life! but the Emperor, I imagine, doesn't mean us to go to our graves without having chastised those upstart Prussians; not to mention the red-coats, who hate us at the bottom of their hearts."

"Bravo, father," interrupted, gaily, a young voice; "now we're coming to perfidious Albion!"

"Hold your tongue, boy!" exclaimed the speaker who had been addressed as Excellency and M. le Maréchal; "I tell you it is not possible that we should avoid a great war, and then the foremost posts of command will be given to the men whom the chief of the state knows best, and around them will be grouped all the younger officers of the army, who have any ambition. Such fellows as Lancour, there, will be generals before they're forty."

"In the first place, Excellency," repeated Victor, "I do not altogether share your enthusiasm about what you call a great war; and I belong to the men of my time, who (altogether unprofessional) esteem peace as superior to war."

"Pedants and philosophers," broke in M. le Maréchal, with a growl.

"Yes, philosophers, I grant you; that is, men who think a man's life a valuable thing, and utterly repudiate the food-for-cannon theory; but, besides that, I have not your faith in the necessity of a war for France. If she be but well governed at home, and enjoy the freedom which is now the birthright of every civilised country, her position in Europe is secure; she

has greatness enough. She has no one to fear, and can therefore afford to rest her own claims to respect upon a worthier feeling than fear upon the part of her neighbours."

But, at this, the anger of the high dignitary burst forth in unmeasured terms, and he roundly anathematised the whole school of the young army, who, he said, were all sentimentalists and dreamers, disciples of the philanthropists of the Revolution, and unworthy of the honour of being Frenchmen.

"Bugeaud is answerable for a vast deal," he growled, "and his pupil, Trochu, for more still; with all their prating about intelligence. But, thank God! the Emperor will one day set that all to rights, and we shall have the war that has been due to us ever since the morrow of Waterloo!"

"If so, Excellency," replied Victor, "I shall not be the only French soldier who will deplore it for the sake of France's dignity and station in the world."

"And much the Emperor will care for that! And much that will stand in the way of his making use of the best men he finds. It is of little avail your being obstinate, Lancour. You will, one of these days, be appointed about the Emperor's own person; and then, when you see how easy it is to rise, you'll soon get rid of all your fine humanitarian notions."

"It is not in the Emperor's power to force me to do what I am resolved not to do, Excellency," answered Victor, gravely. "I will return at the end of this month to Algeria, or I will retire from the army."

"Tut, tut, young man; all talk. Don't tell an old soldier like me such nonsense; you'll find many a reason for thinking a stay in Paris pleasant, I warrant you. Everybody has some chain that binds him to Paris."

"I have none," was the reply; "and I repeat it, I would leave the army sooner than be condemned to stay here."

Claire had noted every word of the above conversation, and thought how she was at the source of all Victor's acts, and how, much as he loved the stern duties of his career, and formed as he was, in spite of all he might say, for all the higher aims of true, ennobling ambition, how his duty to her overruled every other thought, and regulated the entire tenor of his life.

The group on the other side of the archway had apparently left its position, for the voices that had spoken were no longer heard, and the fragments of talk that ensued were carried on in feminine tones.

"He is terribly altered," said one voice.

"You can see how he has suffered," said another.

"Suffered! what nonsense you do talk; as if a man ever suffered for love."

These words were uttered in a tone of biting sarcasm by the Duchesse de Varignan. The young Marquise recognised her accents.

"Well, all the same, it is a great sacrifice," observed a somewhat pleasanter voice; "you see the wound rankles in him. He has, no doubt, the most glorious career in the army; everything lies before him, yet he cannot bear to come back here—he would rather

live in the desert than in the place where he lived with her."

"Ah! that struck you, too, did it, Jeanne?" inquired what seemed to be a more elderly person.

"Struck me! why, I should think so. Who could fail to see the truth. Poor fellow!"

"What a pity!"

"What a shame!"

"And for such a woman as Berthe de Mottefort, too," added Madame de Varignan, "so uninteresting, so devoid, to my sense at least, of all attraction."

"Yes," rejoined the voice that seemed less youthful; "but I'll tell you what, my friends, no man can get over all of a sudden the fireside memories left him by a woman who has been for three or four years associated with his everyday life (particularly when she has quit-
ted him, not he her), he may fancy he don't care, but he does, all the same; and he won't be able to bear living in the same place, depend upon that—it's just one of the worst consequences of these illicit attachments."

Claire heard every word, and though her whole reason and judgment protested in Victor's favour, and though her whole soul repelled the notion of Victor's weakness, and bore witness to his truth towards herself, still an agony of terror seized upon her that she could not quell. For the moment all command of herself was gone, and had circumstances aided, and her cousin Victor been by her side, she would have been more at his mercy than she might later choose to remember.

Now, world, do not judge this agonised woman. Wild thoughts whirl through her brain, and she is torn and buffeted by her passionate misery. But with her thoughts you have nothing to do; they are sacred from your justice so long as they assert themselves not in deeds. Watch her acts only; they belong to you, and if she act bravely, respect her. All have struggled—that is what the strugglers must remember when they have vanquished. It is in the memory of the violence, of the sin, of the crime, overcome, but conceived, that lies the obligation to be merciful.

When M. de Beauvoisin came to fetch his wife, she stared at him for one second as though she knew him not. Her teeth chattered with cold, and her hands were burning hot.

"You have got a fever-fit, Claire," said her husband, with genuine anxiety. "You have had a chill; you should have sent for me. Come, quick."

She drew her lace shawl about her, shiveringly, rose, took Olivier's arm, and fighting now against her suffering resolutely,—

"It will pass away," she said, in a husky voice. "It is, as you say, a chill."

"Pass away," repeated Olivier; "I hope it will, indeed; but these chills are frightfully dangerous. These are just the very attacks people die of," he added, with well-meaning solicitude, but with his accustomed delicacy of tact.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Circle narrows.

For two or three days Claire felt as if her thoughts had no resting-place. She was breathless from misery, and though in her bitter waking hours and in her sleepless nights she tried to pray, her prayers were incoherent; she was too weak to ask with all her heart for what her heart was breaking, but yet too strong to petition for what she might not desire. That she would not do; she held on desperately to the right, and gasped out incessant appeals to God to have mercy upon her. Claire was utterly alone in this trial, and could lean upon no one, and apply to no one for support; and she knew it.

Ever since the day of Victor's return the young Marquise had forbore to utter his name to Madame Beaudouin, and had, indeed, avoided being alone with her aunt. She felt that what was tearing her heart in twain now was not to be registered, as it were, noted down and made unforgetable by confession to another. Claire was humbled by what tortured her, and resolved that out of respect for the name she bore, and for her wedded state, she would carry alone the burthen placed upon her.

Oh! how she wept over the dream from which she

had been awakened—over the proud belief in which she had lived of the holiness of her love! It was gone, and for ever; and the passion with which she had inspired Victor was of no other nature than that which he had felt for Berthe, who so little deserved his affection. Was this indeed so? That she could not know, must never dare wish even to discover; it was enough that the possible rivalry with such another had been held up before her eyes, and in the deadliness of her fear lay the whole weight of her punishment.

Once, in her agony, she thought of telling the whole to Olivier. But some instinct warned her that he was incapable of understanding what she would reveal, or why she revealed it. He would think too little or too much of what she told him, but he would not think rightly of it; still, she had no one to help her, and might she not once in her need appeal to the husband who had been allotted to her, and cry out to him, "Save me from myself!"

No! She would bear it all alone, and, with God's blessing, overcome it; there were examples of such victories. There were women, virtuous and pure, who had loved and suffered as she had done, and who had yet stood upright, and borne the shock and outlived it, and done their duty—why not she?

Olivier was, after his fashion, very kind to his wife all this time, and this too, she bore, though it had its hardness in more ways than one. He was full of solicitude for her health and material comforts, and, above all, anxious, as is ever the wont of the good-

natured vulgar, that she should amuse herself; amusement, the distraction, namely, of the mind from all its ills, being, according to him, a purchasable commodity, like a necklace or a horse.

On the fourth day after the ball at the Russian embassy, the young Marquise went to the Italian Opera with her mother and her husband. Olivier left them before the first act of the *Trovatore* was ended, and the two ladies remained alone, unless when visitors came to the box to pay their court to them. At the close of the first act Henri Dupont established himself opposite to Madame de Clavreuil, and engaged her in conversation in which Claire took but an indifferent part; but, as Henri was seated behind the latter's chair, he did not see the objects that attracted her attention.

There was one.

The box occupied by Claire was just in the bend of the house, so that the inmates of the next box but two were more visible than those of the two neighbouring boxes themselves. A door opened and shut, and Claire knew who had come in though the new-comer stood concealed, and only shook hands with the two ladies seated in front; but when the hand was stretched forth, she knew it too, and from that moment her opera glass was no more laid down, and she looked actively in every direction save in that of the next box but two, where the new-comer had just entered.

And so the second act passed, and Claire tried all she could to listen and understand what was going on

upon the stage, but she could not. An irresistible force compelled her, and, as the curtain dropped upon the *finale* of the second act, her eyes wandered towards the spot where M. de Lancour stood. He was leaning against the back of the box, and his head rose above that of the two ladies in front, and of a fair haired young girl who was bending down between them, and apparently imparting to them some very interesting piece of news, for they listened eagerly and laughed frequently. At the identical moment when Claire looked at her cousin his glance was not fixed upon her, but seemingly upon someone or something in the row of boxes on the second tier. This reassured her, and she did not avert her eyes; but before the will to do so had returned to her, she had met his, and they were looking at each other.

Only a look! one look in all a life of renouncement—might it not be forgiven? The more so too, that poor Claire felt that look was saving her from the misery that was unbearable. What she could bear was the sacrifice—she had borne it, would bear it unflinchingly to the end—but what she could not bear was the doubt. To doubt of Victor was madness, for in doubt of him lay the incapacity of answering for herself.

In the look she met fixed upon her there was a revelation of all those things which they alone could appreciate. It was a mournful gaze, tender in the extreme and charged with all the loving anguish of a

farewell that may not be spoken. In the painful earnestness that had stamped itself now upon every feature of Victor's face there was a warrant of his soul's nobility, and a mute reproach to her who could have for one instant mistaken him. Claire's heart grew calm under that look, and Claire had once more found a resting-place. Of Victor's love and truth and worthiness she had no fear now; the man whose eyes rested on hers then had loved none other as he loved her; and between him and her there rose no lesser memory. What if sorrow's shade lay over them both? they had not loved to be happier, but to be nobler—their love was not joy, but suffering—a passion in very truth and deed—a truth-and-duty-worship, strong and brave; and Claire knew that this was so, and was comforted. That one true, mournful, steadfast, tender look had called her back to her own higher self, and made her for ever proof against the vain words and mean beliefs of vulgar minds. Now her whole soul might love him as before, for, as before, he had relinquished her—relinquished her, not because it was easy so to do, but because his unfathomable love made all things possible that were to be accomplished for her sake.

And all this in one look? All this! nay, a whole world more of bliss and wretchedness and rapturous heart-love, and passionate conviction victorious over all the mere dead-weight of logical lifeless facts. Let those deny it who never once in all their lives have quivered to the touch of the soul's electricity, and felt

the truth unreasonable, flashed into the very depths of their being.

Claire was convinced, and calmed as by a magnetic power. When she lowered her eyes she experienced a strange sense of rest. Again she raised her opera-glass, and looked away, so that none should mark the tears that stole slowly, almost unconsciously, down her cheek.

They were not tears of bitterness or of pain.

Whilst the carriages were being called and waited for, Claire could not but hear the fragments of conversation going on in the crowd around her. But the words came to her ears, as it were, materially, without penetrating into her inner sense. She was absorbed, and did not even remark how anxious and uneasy Olivier looked when he came to escort her out of her box.

"To be sure, it is the very last thing one should have thought of," muttered a voice, a little way behind the young Marquise.

"You mean the last thing *you* would have thought of," replied the sharp tones of the Duchesse de Varignan; but then, your experience has been limited in that direction; it does not astonish *me*."

"Perhaps not the thing," argued the voice that had first spoken, "but the man; it is the man that astonishes me."

"Oh, it's M. de Moranges you're wondering at, is it?" retorted the Duchesse.

"Well, I don't know; but ask M. de Sauveterre there what he thinks."

"I invented her," observed the person alluded to, who was standing close by.

"Well, and are you so confounded by this marriage as my cousin Jean?" asked Madame de Varignan, adding, "You know Jean has not been a week back from Cochin China, which may explain, if not excuse, his extreme capacity of surprise."

"I'm never surprised at anything," answered M. de Sauveterre. "I've lived too long, and seen too much for that; but I may as well confess that I did not expect it, for that is really the truth—I did not expect it."

"What, you thought the magnificent Marquis above any nonsense of that sort, did you?" rejoined the Duchesse.

"Oh! I beg to be understood," urged M. de Sauveterre. "When a thing is either very wicked or very silly, one can understand it; but this is worse than either—it is useless. That is what I did not expect."

"Of course, you do not admit the possibility of there being any love in the business?" suggested the young man who had been called cousin Jean.

"Any what?" echoed M. de Sauveterre, with a look, the cynical contemptuousness of which it would be in vain to attempt to describe. "Any what? Moranges! One sees, young man, that you have come from beyond the seas."

"Yes, so I thought," replied cousin Jean, in an

apologetic tone; "besides, at M. de Moranges' time of life——"

"Don't be a goose, Jean," exclaimed Madame de Varignan. "If anything could help to support your insane suggestion it would just be his age; but," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper, "do you see, we are right in the midst of the nearest relations—just in the very bosom of the happy family—and" (pressing forward as she spoke) "I must go and compliment them upon it."

At the first mention of the hateful subject (which had been made loudly enough for every one round to hear), Madame de Clavreuil had shuddered, and turned round to see who the speaker was. At the moment when it suited Madame de Varignan to perceive this, Madame de Clavreuil was looking persistently another way, and holding Count Dupont's arm in a manner that seemed involuntarily to solicit protection. But no one whom it was the Duchesse de Varignan's purpose to plague ever escaped her.

"I want to congratulate you," said she, in her boldest manner, forcing herself through the intervening bystanders, and laying a hand on Madame de Clavreuil's arm. "I want to congratulate you on the approaching event" (Madame de Clavreuil shrank from her touch); "when is it to be?"

"Elise," ejaculated the unfortunate Countess, indignantly, "how can you? Such an infamy is no subject for pleasantry of any kind."

"Ta, ta, ta, ta," answered Madame de Varignan,

nothing daunted; "don't get on your high horse. Infamy as much as you choose, or take any worse word you like; but she is going to be Claire's aunt all the same. There you are again at work with your fictions; but the Bastille was taken in 1792, my dear friends. You can't send her there; nor get a *lettre de cachet* (oh! if you could, I'd help you to that; but you can't); you can't put her down, or put her away, or in any way suppress her. We live under the discipline of the blessed code, and mayor and curé will make the whole thing square; so my advice is, to look it in the face; no fictions will serve; you'll have to bear it. You'll be for calling her Madame I-don't-know-what; but it's all no use. Look it in the face. Make up your little minds to it; she's going to be Madame la Marquise de Moranges, and Claire's aunt; and now, do please answer my question—when is it to be?"

Before Madame de Clavreuil could recover, however, from this attack of malicious volubility, Henri Dupont prepared to answer in her place.

"That it will be as you say, Madame la Duchesse," observed he, "is, I think, more than probable; but when, is a totally different thing."

"Well," interrupted Madame de Varignan, "I shouldn't fancy that M. de Moranges would be for indefinite delays. Men at his age are mostly in a hurry."

"That may be too," replied Henri, in his cool, quiet way; "but he is not the only party concerned, and the question you are pleased to put must depend

somewhat upon the other person, and that person is said to be so very ill, that——”

“That she actually can’t be married!” cried the Duchesse, with one of her harsh, unpleasant laughs. “Well, that is the veriest comedy I ever heard of! Do you really believe that a woman of that kind can be prevented by any earthly obstacle from being made Marquise de Moranges? I don’t.”

“I can’t say,” answered Dupont. “I was assured that she had been for the last week so seriously ill that the publication of the banns had been put off.”

“I’ll drive to the mairie of our arrondissement to-morrow, and see if they are posted up there,” exclaimed the Duchesse.

“I know a man who did that to-day,” added M. de Sauveterre, “but there is nothing announced as yet.”*

“You see, Madame la Duchesse, your curiosity will have to learn patience,” said Henri Dupont. “Your question as to the *when* remains unanswered.”

“If you chose,” retorted she, sharply, “you could answer it; for I am convinced you know all about it.”

When Claire had heard Henri Dupont mention the fact of the delay in her uncle’s marriage being caused by the illness of the Sphinx, she had turned half round, and had allowed her attention to be seriously engaged by what he was saying.

* When two persons are about to be married in France, the banns have to be printed and posted up at the door of the mairie for a fortnight previously.

She did not turn round sufficiently to force herself into the disagreeable duty of acknowledging Madame de Varignan, but sufficiently to lose sight of what went on upon Olivier's side, whose arm she held.

At that moment the crowd moved on a few steps; Claire and her husband were separated from Madame de Clavreuil and the group who were speaking of M. de Moranges' extraordinary marriage; and a man, detaching himself from another group, came straight up, and laid his hand on Olivier's shoulder.

"I've a quarrel with you, old fellow," said, good humouredly, Gaston de Vivienne—for he it was; "how can you allow that rascally adventurer to speak to you?"

"Who do you mean?" answered M. de Beauvoisin, with evident embarrassment. "I've been speaking to nobody."

"Yes you have," retorted Gaston. "I was crossing over the lobby just now, between the second and third act, and making right up to you, when what should I see but that villanous fellow Mardonnet actually standing talking to you."

"Oh—aye—yes! I remember," stammered out Olivier. "He just came up to me for a moment. After all, you know, he's the deputy of the department, and one can't refuse to listen to him if he speaks to one."

"I beg your pardon, *mon cher*," interposed Gaston, warmly; "one can, and one must. He wouldn't speak to me, or to my father, you may depend upon it. You're too easy, Olivier, you must shake the fellow off

like an insect—he's nothing but a vile, low intriguer; and he has got a plan in his head now that you must help us to thwart. You know the Brunoy branch of the new railway? Well, he wants to be made chairman of the board, and there are not wanting local influences to support him; but we must all hold together, and——"

M. de Vivienne's carriage was called, and he had to leave Olivier in order to offer his arm to his wife, who at that moment was speaking to Claire. But as he left him he said,—

"Now mind, old boy, you left us in the lurch about the deputation, but you must stand by us this time, come what will."

Claire heard these words, and involuntarily looked at her husband, who stood still staring at vacancy, and as pale as a ghost.

When M. de Beauvoisin's carriage was announced, his wife roused him out of the fit of absorption into which he seemed to have fallen.

From the door of the theatre to that of the Hôtel de Beauvoisin neither of these two spoke one word to the other; each was wrapped in the distracting thoughts of his and her own life-drama.

And herein lies the ill-advisedness of those who judge the tragic element of our modern age inferior to that of the ancients. Circumstance alone is different. Our dramas have more to do with suffering than crime, but a deep pitifulness lies in the very discrepancy existing now between real unconquered human nature

and the colourless monotony of the aspects of civilisation. Our volcanoes rage forth from under the surface of flowery lakes, where no one ever dreamt of them; but they rage and destroy all the same. The heart is for ever one; and between our tea-tables and our stock exchanges there are tragedies enacted that would furnish matter for a Shakspeare or a Euripides.

CHAPTER XXV.

Too Dear.

It was but too true what Gaston de Vivienne had complained of; and Olivier had allowed the man, of whom everybody around him spoke so contemptuously, and whose opponent he had declined to be at the election, to come up and speak familiarly with him in a place of public resort. He had tried, it was true, to evade him, but since his elevation to the rank of a member of the legislative body, Mardonnet seemed somewhat more difficult to evade; he had tried to cut short the speech addressed to him by the deputy, but the deputy would not let him. He had not shaken hands with M. Théophile, it is true—he had contrived to escape that—but Monsieur Théophile was preparing to compensate himself for this by making an attempt upon M. de Beauvoisin's coat-button. He would be heard, and what he wanted to say was precisely what Gaston had alluded to:—he wanted to make sure that Olivier would not join the great landed proprietors of the department, the gentlemen of Savre-et-Merle in trying to prevent his being nominated chairman of the board on the new branch of the railroad from Brunoy. He wanted just that, only that! and Olivier did not dare to flatly negative his request. He attempted to

make Mardonnet understand that at that moment he was in a hurry and could not possibly attend to business, but that, "at some other time," etc. Yes! but at what "other time?" The new deputy wished to be precise, and pressed for the when, the where, and the how; for the place, the day, and the hour; and Olivier, in an agony of embarrassments, scarcely knew by means of what promise he had extricated himself from the clutches of his tormentor; he did not like to think of it.

The next day, at noon, a time when he was certain not to meet his uncle, M. de Beauvoisin sallied forth, and walking straight into the vestibule of the Hôtel de Moranges, said he must see Mademoiselle de Mourjonville for a few minutes upon a very important matter. The footman who took the message came back, saying it was scarcely possible for Mademoiselle to receive anyone, she was so busy, but that, if M. le Marquis would walk into the library, she would come to him.

He did so; and, as he entered at one door, Aspasia entered by another.

She was, as usual, attired with that sober unobtrusive taste that made the grace of neatness her unfailing attribute, and she had as usual that smile, and that well-studied agreeability of aspect which made everybody extol the delightful evenness of her temper. If you had examined her minutely, however, you would have perceived a something (barely perceptible) about her which was not altogether as usual. Her senses seemed, as it were, all astir; she was a shade less quiet

than was her wont; her eye glanced about, her ears were apparently sharpened—she was listening, or searching, or on the watch in short; but Olivier did not note all this, and he looked as though it relieved him to be with her.

“It is difficult for me now to get away,” said Mlle. Aspasia, as she shook hands with her visitor. “She does not like me to be a quarter of an hour out of her sight.”

“Is she no better?” asked M. de Beauvoisin, in a tone that the deeper hold obtained over him by some other subject rendered almost indifferent.

“Sometimes better, sometimes worse,” replied Mlle. de Mourjonville, with an accent of compassion; “poor thing! she had hardly any sleep at all last night, so that this morning she has dropped off once or twice.”

“And she is asleep now?” rejoined Olivier.

“Just dozing.”

“Then you can listen to me,” exclaimed the Marquis, with a fine burst of selfishness, as he threw himself into a huge arm-chair by the fire.

Aspasia walked forward a step or two, and with folded arms stood looking at him with not very admiring wonder.

“I avow,” she said, at last, in her most biting tones, “that whenever I come across the persons of either sex, who are described as being under the influence of the tender passion, they are to me objects of the profoundest curiosity, and I more and more devoutly thank my stars that I have remained in ignor-

ance of what, I believe, continue to be styled by courtesy the affections! Now look at the example before us: here are you, Monsieur le Marquis," (her voice was infinitely contemptuous as she addressed him,) "here are you, who to my knowledge have shared (in some degree, I suppose) the attachment that our amiable friend upstairs conceived for you, and here is M. de Moranges apparently caring enough for her to trample upon every other consideration in the world in order to make her his wife, and now that she is visited by illness—a lingering illness, which takes her out of the sphere of your pleasures—you neither of you in reality mind whether she lives or dies. Don't protest against my words, it is the truth! you are bored by the whole thing—nothing more."

"I assure you you are mistaken as to me," replied M. de Beauvoisin; "poor Claudine! I often think of her. Is she much changed? what do the doctors say it is? but I thought my uncle was tremendously anxious and grieved."

Mlle. de Mourjonville's expression of countenance was altered, as she rather hurriedly said, "Oh; you know the doctors give different opinions—we see so many of them; but the illness seems to be a kind of gastric fever; some of them say they cannot make it out at all, and that it is wonderful she is not yet dead; others again give hopes of her recovery. Fourchon, the new celebrity whom everybody raves about, was called in yesterday, and he gives serious hopes. She is better to-day—much better; though the night was

bad, she ate, this morning, with a kind of appetite; she was not exactly a healthy subject, but she's strong—very strong," and thus speaking Mlle. Aspasia looked musingly into the fire.

"Thank God! poor thing," murmured Olivier, trying to compose an expression of voice and face suited to the occasion.

"And you fancied your uncle was beside himself with grief, did you?" went on Mlle. de Mourjonville in her own strange, peculiar tone. "You thought that because he committed the folly of marrying her he would be inconsolable at her death? Well; it seems you have a good deal to learn, yet. I had something, I confess. Your uncle will marry Claudine when she gets well, and will be a doting husband; but if she dies he will in a few months grow to regard it as a very lucky event, mark my words! and that is what comes of what ninety-ninths of the world call Love!"

"But you do not believe that she will die?" rejoined M. de Beauvoisin.

"No, I do not," replied Mlle. de Mourjonville, in the tone in which one comforts a child to whom one refuses what it wants; "but that assurance to your ears means that I am consequently at liberty to attend to you. Now, what is it you want of me?"

Olivier tried, for decency's sake, to appear to attach sufficient importance to the condition of the poor sufferer, who, as far as her knowledge of affection went, had given him all she possessed, and not to seem in the dying woman's house to have no memory for aught

save his own concerns; but he was, in truth, wild with anxiety to broach the subject upon which he came.

"I have no time to spare, Monsieur le Marquis," observed Aspasia; "be so good as to tell me what I can do to serve you. Rest assured that our charming friend will be quite well in a week or two."

As she uttered these words, her lip curled with ineffable disdain, while she cast a look at Olivier which he did not perceive.

"Well, I'll tell you," he began. "I am in the most awkward position possible. Last night at the Italiens——"

"You met my brother-in-law," suggested Aspasia.

"You knew?"

"No, no; quiet yourself, pray. I knew that he wished to speak to you for some days past upon business. Bless my soul, there's nothing so very extraordinary in that; what is there in speaking to him? He's the deputy of your department; he hasn't got the plague."

"Yes, but——" M. de Beauvoisin hesitated.

"But what?" asked Mlle. de Mourjonville.

"It is impossible for me to do what he wishes," replied Olivier, in low but firm accents.

"Ah!" drawled out Aspasia, leaning back in her chair, and surveying her visitor from head to foot; "impossible, is it?"

"It is so, and you know it is so," retorted M. de Beauvoisin. "You know that this time it is impossible."

"Then, I think I should tell him so," remarked Mlle. de Mourjonville, forcing the expression of her countenance to be an almost perfect blank.

"Not I," murmured Olivier; "but you—I want you to tell it him."

Mlle. de Mourjonville was pleased to look, as it were, all over her companion, leaving no corner of him unstudied.

"You wish me to take upon myself an unpleasant duty for your sake, my good friend?" at length she said, in a voice that chilled her hearer; "do I understand you rightly?"

"Well," stammered Olivier; "I wish—I hope—it's not so very unpleasant."

"If it were not unpleasant, you would not apply to another person to discharge it; but never mind that, if it were only unpleasant I might consent; but it's unprofitable. All I can say can bring no result. My brother-in-law's interests are too deeply concerned. I cannot help you, Monsieur le Marquis."

There was a dull despair in Olivier's face as these words reached his ear that arrested Mlle. de Mourjonville's attention. It was such genuine utter helplessness that it almost touched her.

"Be so good as to examine the position," she said, as though moved by a charitable desire to explain away her seeming hardness. "You will recognise the impossibility of any help being afforded. Mardonnet has got to be a deputy; true, that is a good deal, more, perhaps, than he had a right to expect: but that leads

him to want more; he wants money; he finds the first stepping stone under his feet, the chairmanship of this railway board, a local distinction, a natural introduction to what is termed business—the key to possibilities of money-making later—he finds this; and you expect that I can persuade him to give it up. You are young and innocent in affairs, my dear Marquis!”

“No, no; that is not what I mean,” urged Olivier, with unwonted energy. “I don’t expect that even you can succeed in making Mardonnet renounce his present scheme——” Again he paused.

“Then what do you expect?” retorted Aspasia, driving her dagger-pointed looks into him.

“I don’t expect anything,” replied Olivier, diffidently; “but I hoped that you would help me to extricate myself from the necessity of supporting him in his project.”

Her look altered somewhat as she listened.

“You must explain yourself more clearly,” she observed, in a tone not altogether discouraging.

“May I do so?” he ejaculated with a, for him, extraordinary degree of animation. “Will it be any use my explaining myself? will you help me? will you annihilate the hold he has——?”

“Hush! hush!” and Mlle. de Mourjonville smiled, as she put her hand upon Olivier’s mouth. “You ask from me a proof of absolute devotion—not only the abandonment of my own interests, but the sacrifice of the interests of my nearest relatives. Suppose Mar-

donnet died: it is obviously my interest that his widow should be able to live without assistance from me——”

“But that is just what I want to propose to you,” interrupted Olivier; “it is in your own interest that I came.”

“Well, don’t over excite yourself, my good friend,” murmured Aspasia; “I have, as you know, a most friendly feeling towards you, and we can talk over the matter; but, to prove to you my impartiality, let me tell you, I think you immensely exaggerate the importance of the whole business. What can it matter, in reality, whether you give Théophile your support or not? You may have ideas of your own; you may be of opinion that a democratic deputy, a man of the people, is a good thing; you would not be the only one of your caste. You might——”

“I cannot do it, I cannot do it,” interposed Olivier, getting gradually out of himself. “I don’t care one straw for republicans, or royalists, or any opinion under the sun. I shouldn’t mind Soulouque being Emperor, or Jules Favre, or any body (so long as he ruled hard). I never read a paper; but I must go with my kind; they see and know that I am forced into doing something I can’t bear! They’ll soon begin to ask why? You don’t know what it is to be held in that way! Life’s not worth having. Gaston, too, above all!”

“Yes, to be sure,” muttered Mlle. de Mourjonville, parenthetically; “the Vivienues! that’s awkward! that comes home!”

“Gaston! my God! conceive for one instant, if he

guessed! and Henri and Victor! Think how it hangs over me."

"Oh, as to guessing," remarked Aspasia, with a half-comical twist of her mouth; "people don't guess at these kind of things; they either know them or remain for ever ignorant; there's no guess-work in black and white; but why need any one of them ever know?"

"Only I know!" retorted Olivier; "and I dream of it; and if I had a bad fever, and was delirious, I should tell it all——"

Mlle. de Mourjonville was watching her visitor as a cat watches a bird. "And," suggested she, with a very peculiar look; "if the trace were destroyed, your knowledge would cease to be? you would forget all about it, and be immaculate in your own esteem—that's so pleasant! so fitting in a man of your name and degree!"

"Don't torture me!" cried Olivier; "remember that your hold only rests on a fraud, on a theft——"

"Stop there, if you please," replied Mlle. de Mourjonville, looking dangerous; "that ground is not to be trodden. I have once for all explained, and you know as well as I do that your own inadvertency alone is to blame; it was your own fault if you burned what was of no consequence, and left what was; it was the finger of Providence. Camille was not to blame; she was not brought up to practise the subtle delicacies of honour, such as they are taught in your illustrious houses" (her tone was bitterly ironical), "she found

the trace of what had happened, and kept it—that is all; and as I say, that trace destroyed, and your knowledge of any small weakness in the past goes with it—well, that would cost dear, besides, how could I answer to Mardonnet, for——?”

“Never mind Mardonnet!” exclaimed Olivier, in downright anguish, and seizing Mlle. de Mourjonville’s hands in his, “I cannot go on in this way. I tell you life’s not worth having; I’m afraid of everyone I meet; afraid to go out or come home. Tell me what I am to do—I will pay any price for freedom; but save me, my dear, good Aspasia, you are so clever—save me from Mardonnet!”

As Olivier uttered the last words his voice shook, and there were tears in his eyes.

There was in the agony of this stupid man, whom no one had ever seen moved, and in the loquacity of this dull, silent nature, something that touched Aspasia. She seemed to relent, and after gazing at the fire for a few seconds, biting her lips, knitting her brow, and, in fact, calculating how much each contributor was to furnish—how much the Dowager, how much M. de Moranges, and now how much his nephew,—

“My dear friend,” she said, blandly, “you interest me; I will do my best. You know I like to oblige; but I am terribly poor—a dependent myself; and, as I said just now, if Camille were to be left unprovided for I should have to support her.”

“But tell me how much,” continued Olivier, eagerly.

“Well, I should like to spare your purse, too,”

answered the considerate Aspasia. "Suppose we said two hundred thousand francs; you might have what you wish for in your hands this very day—the sum is a moderate one; yes, for two hundred thousand francs I will agree to take all further responsibility on myself, and you will be for ever free—free even to forget that you ever owed me anything."

But a bucket of cold water thrown suddenly upon his head could not have acted as a more potent refrigerator upon Olivier than did the mention of the sum required. This man, whose very latent energy had been called forth in resistance to what he regarded as an intolerable danger, was ready now to front that danger rather than pay the price that was required from him, in order to avert it. The price took now the form of the intolerable, and the so dreaded danger receded into the background, assuming for the moment a bearable aspect.

"Two hundred thousand francs!" echoed M. de Beauvoisin, considerably perplexed between his innate fear of Mlle. de Mourjonville and his indignation at the (as he thought) outrageous demand on his purse.

"Two hundred thousand francs," repeated Aspasia, mildly. "Ten thousand francs a year at five per cent. It is the price at which I can afford to enter into the transaction you propose, because when I have entered into it, I forfeit all future claim upon my brother-in-law, who will naturally think I have betrayed him, and at the same time I should have to assist Camille if anything happened to her husband. However," she

added, rising from her chair, "I have no time, as I told you—I must return to my patient upstairs."

Olivier passed his hand over his forehead, repeating again,—

"Two hundred thousand francs."

"You know I have told you all along," resumed Aspasia, moving towards the door, "that I could not understand your making such a fuss about the matter; you had far better just do what Théophile asks of you, and keep your money in your pocket."

"It is too dear," murmured he.

"That is altogether another question," retorted Mlle. de Mourjonville, turning round, with one hand on the handle of the door; "each one knows what value he attaches to what he purchases. Reckoned by what appeared to be your fears, I should have thought almost any sum cheap—but that's your affair. *Au revoir*, Monsieur le Marquis, I must go now."

As Olivier threw himself into a cab to drive to the club he muttered to himself again,—

"No! decidedly, it is too dear."

CHAPTER XXVI.

Freedom Won and Lost.

FOR the next two days Olivier said to himself that the sum named by Aspasia was "too dear;" but that was simply because the impression made upon him by the price required was more recent than that left by the evil from which he was labouring to escape. M. de Beauvoisin was like a great many weak-minded men; he calculated nothing with precision; but always over- or under-rated what he was capable of achieving or suffering. When the wish to shake off Mardonnet was uppermost, he honestly thought that he was capable of giving the world, as people term it, in order to shake Mardonnet off; but then, Olivier's notion of the world to be thus given, was (as is often the case) very circumscribed. When he assured Mlle. Mourjon that to get rid of an intolerable annoyance he would pay any price, he had in his mind, a vague notion of an exceedingly moderate price. The moment the price was brought down upon him like a sledge-hammer, it did what a blow of that kind does, it stunned him, and his very indifferent faculties were crushed for the moment beyond the power of combining or calculating. He thought he would give anything to escape from a danger, but the "anything" seeming in its turn to be

out of the question; he believed he could bear the threatened evil; in which he was utterly mistaken, as he soon found.

He received a note from Mardonnet, which he destroyed and did not answer; fancying that by not answering it he could escape further importunity; but then he had to settle accounts with the other party, and Gaston de Vivienne pinioned him down, and made him pledge his honour that he would go all lengths with his own set in preventing Mardonnet from attaining his ends in the matter of the railway committee in Savre-et-Merle. Then he got another note from Mardonnet, who seemed prodigiously well-informed of whatever he said or did, and in this document he was certain he discovered the business-like style of Mlle. de Mourjonville. He began to waver again, and to discuss with himself, and his perplexities were terrible. Two hundred thousand francs was a large sum; and, as is mostly the case with men whose education has upon no one single point developed in them the idea of absolute truth, it was alternately larger or smaller to his mind, according as fear or love of money became uppermost. Might *Aspasie* perhaps be brought to *take less*? No! his inmost conscience said there was no more bargaining with Mlle. Mourjon than with *Shylock*, and that, had she specified a million of ducats, or a pound of flesh, she would relentlessly, and to the last hour, hold to the letter of her bargain.

There was to be a meeting of the Savre-et-Merle landowners at the Duc de Vivienne's on the next day

but one, and Olivier was to attend it with Henri Dupont, who was to fetch him at twelve o'clock. Mardonnet was believed to be at Malleray, doing his utmost with the local influences. Olivier breathed more freely.

But the very day preceding that on which he was to meet his neighbours at the Duc de Vivienne's, Olivier was informed by his valet of a fact which, insignificant as it appeared, upset all his calculations. The above-mentioned functionary brought to his master, at his breakfast, a visiting-card, on which was printed:—

THEOPHILE MARDONNET,

Deputy of Savre-et-Merle.

"That gentleman called this morning," said the man, "but it had not yet struck ten, and I absolutely refused to disturb M. le Marquis. However, he said he would call again to-day at half-past five, and hoped to make quite sure of seeing M. le Marquis."

"Impudent rascal!" muttered Olivier, between his teeth; not so low, nevertheless, but that his valet caught the words and fixed an inquisitive glance upon his master.

"The gentleman was very importunate, indeed," continued the domestic; "he came back, after he had turned to go away, and said, I must be quite sure to tell M. le Marquis that if he found no one at home at half-past five to-day, he would be certain to be found to-morrow, at twelve, at M. le Duc de Vivienne's" (Olivier started, and turned deadly pale), "and he like-

wise added, that M. le Marquis was aware of the business upon which he came. If I might be permitted to have an opinion, I should say he was a remarkably vulgar-looking——”

“But I don’t want your opinion, Leroux,” interrupted Olivier, with a haughtiness to which his own attendants were utterly unaccustomed, his habit being to spoil his servants thoroughly. “You may go.”

And the valet departed, needing no further information to teach him that something had gone very wrong with his master.

Olivier had risen late that day, and was breakfasting alone, which happened sometimes, though not often, to him. He left his meal untouched, swallowing only with unsteady haste a cup of too hot tea. Before noon, he went out on foot, took the first *fiacre* he could find, and drove to his stock-broker’s, where he staid not many minutes, then to his notary’s, where he staid half-an-hour, and then to the Hôtel de Moranges. It was between one and two when he reached his uncle’s house, but there was no one at home; Mlle. de Mourjonville was really out, and Madame Claudine’s maid, whom M. de Beauvoisin caused to be summoned, reported, that though exceedingly weak, her mistress was, on the whole, so much better, that Mademoiselle had been enabled to go out shopping, an employment she had been debarred from for some time owing to the indefatigable assiduity of her attendance upon Madame.

Olivier stood for an instant before the abigail, as

though bewildered by the disappointment caused him by Mlle. de Mourjonville's absence.

"I must see her," was all he went on repeating; and at last: "I see but one way," he said, "I dine here to-day," (the tirewoman observed that she knew there was a great dinner at the hotel), "tell Mademoiselle that I will come very early—a good half-hour before anybody else—if she will be ready. I will not detain her long, but I have a most important matter to speak to her about."

"Perhaps something connected with the wedding?" suggested archly the lady's-maid, assuming the privilege of her position.

"Why—yes—in fact, that is it," responded disjointedly Olivier; "and it is of the utmost importance."

How Olivier got through the day he himself hardly knew, but at each stroke of the *timbre*, and at each opening and shutting of the *porte cochère* he started nervously, and listened with breathless attention. He was so determined not to be at home at half-past five, that at four o'clock he despatched his valet to the club, telling him to wait for him, as he should dress there. At six o'clock M. de Beauvoisin was dressed, though the dinner-hour at his uncle's was half-past seven; but he had ordered his carriage at half-past six, and meant to make sure of his private audience of Mlle. Aspasia at seven at the latest.

His carriage was ten minutes late, which mattered but little, for he could easily be driven like the wind, and in reality reach the Hôtel de Moranges a quarter

before seven, even. But this very quick driving it was which nearly ruined his entire combination. In one of the streets in which improvements have rendered traffic more than difficult, M. de Beauvoisin's *coupé* got blocked by an omnibus; the two coachmen waged war with word and whip; an omnibus horse was reputed injured by the wheel of the aristocratic vehicle, and then came the *sergent de ville* upon the scene, and all idea of rapid progress was cast to the winds.

It was not till Olivier had exhausted every form of protest—whether angry, persuasive, or *pecuniary*,—that he got free, and could again reiterate to his coachman the order to “drive like the wind.”

It was a quarter *past* seven when he sprang into the vestibule of the Hôtel de Moranges.

“Is any one come yet?” he asked anxiously, as he threw his paletot to a footman.

“No one, Monsieur le Marquis,” replied the servant. “Mademoiselle is in the green drawing-room, alone.”

Olivier—usually slow of movement as of speech,—actually bounded forwards, and was in the middle of the “green drawing-room” before any attendant had had time to open the door for him.

Mlle. de Mourjonville was standing before the fire, with one foot resting on the fender, and her hands crossed before her. At the noise made by Olivier's abrupt ingress, she turned round. He was by her side, and had seized one of her hands in his before she was quite aware of who it was who had come in.

“I have brought what you asked,” said he, hur-

riedly, and putting his other hand into the breast pocket of his coat; "here it is; now give me what you promised."

"So, Monsieur le Marquis," replied coolly Mlle. Mourjon, "you find it at last not too dear, do you?"

"Oh! never mind what I find it!" rejoined he, showing her a very thick pocket book.

"Well! let me see."

"Look!" said M. de Beauvoisin, opening the pocket-book, but not giving it out of his hand, as with nervously trembling haste he counted a certain number of bank notes, and showed a written order to his notary to pay the rest to the bearer.

Mlle. Mourjon followed the operation with glances, the rapacity whereof was hard to conceal; but even then she could master herself, and when she had distinctly seen the sum, she had aspired to, within her immediate reach,—

"Some days have passed, M. le Marquis," said she, "since I named that price, which *then* you called 'too dear'; suppose I were, now, in my turn, to call it too cheap?"

"Don't, Aspasia!" replied the Marquis—and it was all he said; but the tone, the expression of countenance, the whole aspect of the man were such that even Mlle. Mourjon was compelled. She no more dared, at that supreme crisis, trifle with that man, than she would have ventured to try her tricks upon a bear at bay.

"Make haste!" added Olivier, "look—it only wants

eight minutes to seven,—for God's sake bring me what you promised, or some one will be coming! go! go quick."

And she did go, though not quickly; on the contrary, she went saunteringly to the door, protesting that she humoured him out of her great good nature, but when she had closed the door she flew.

Olivier fastened his eye upon the clock, and when, at the end of three minutes, Mlle. de Mourjonville re-entered the room, it was to him as though three hours had passed.

"Giving, giving!"* said she, as she held out one hand to receive the pocket-book, and showed in the other the envelope of a letter.

"Here it is," said Olivier; and, as she took it,—

"Let me count, first," observed she, not yet tendering to him the paper she held in her hand.

How he chafed, not allowing himself to snatch it from her.

"All right!" fell at last from her lips, as quietly depositing the little morocco case in her pocket, she offered to M. de Beauvoisin that for which he had paid so high a price.

His fingers grasped the paper twitchingly, and with a sort of convulsion his eyes closed.

"You had better see that all is straight on your side," suggested Aspasia, with a curious smile. "It would be a pity to make for the second time the mistake you made once before."

* A translation of the French, *donnant—donnant*.

M. de Beauvoisin drew a slip of paper from the envelope he held in his hand, looked at it for a second or two scrutinizingly, and yet as with a feeling of repugnance, and then advancing towards the fire prepared to cast the slip of paper into it. At that moment a door opened; quick as lightning Mlle. Mourjon passed between him and the fire, covering him with the folds of her silk dress and whispering,—

“Your uncle! take care! burn it at home!”

Olivier had hidden the slip of paper in the breast pocket of his coat, before his uncle had had time to perceive anything, and as guests began to arrive at the same time he had leisure to recover his self-possession.

But self-possession was perhaps not strictly what Olivier de Beauvoisin recovered that night. He drank more than usual, and was alternately boisterously gay (as was not his wont) or abstracted; and during his fits of abstraction had anyone watched him they would have seen his fingers steal into the breast-pocket of his coat as though to be assured of the presence of something very precious.

After dinner his uncle took occasion to inform him, while they stood a few minutes together and alone, that Fourchon had so immensely benefited Madame Claudine that her cure was to be considered almost certain with time and care, and that that being the case, the banns were to be published in a couple of days, the advertisement at the mairie being to be posted up on the morrow.

Olivier expressed delight at the announcement. (Everything delighted him!)

When the last guest was departing (it was between eleven and twelve), "Stay, Olivier," whispered his uncle; "I mean you to shake hands with your future aunt. I wish you to tell her your satisfaction at what I have just told you; it will be graceful as coming from my nearest relative."

Mlle. Mourjon objected—said that it would disturb the patient, and was visibly annoyed at the notion of the visit. But M. de Moranges, like all selfish men, was not to be gainsaid. He said he had seen Madame Claudine five minutes ago, that she was up and in very good spirits, and that his nephew's act of kind attention would please her far too much to do her harm.

"You are too careful, my dear friend," said, blandly, M. de Moranges, laying his hand upon Aspasia's arm. "If excess were possible in such ceaseless, tender care, I should say yours was absolutely excessive. But I will answer for no harm coming from this little infraction to your regulations."

Mlle. Mourjon yielded, but her vexation, nay, distress, were evident.

"Nay, then, I will set you at ease," said M. de Moranges, gaily. "Watch the clock here, for exactly ten minutes, and if, at the tenth, we are not back in this room, I authorise you to come and turn us both pitilessly out. Ten minutes' quiet talk can injure no one."

The uncle and nephew went; and, when they entered Madame Claudine's room, they found her seated in a huge arm-chair with her feet upon the fender, and though with all the marks of severe recent illness still upon her face, looking handsomer than usual, and full of peaceful contentment.

M. de Beauvoisin kissed the hand of his future aunt, imparted to her the welcome news intrusted to him by his uncle, and talked with a fluency that his hearers were wholly unaccustomed to on his part.

"You are a good fellow, Olivier," exclaimed M. de Moranges, putting his hand on his nephew's shoulder; "and I shall not forget how you have received the announcement of the event which so nearly touches me: many another would have run sulky, whereas you, on the contrary, I never saw you in such spirits in all your life."

"Well, I do feel outrageously happy, uncle," rejoined Olivier, looking just what his words described; "and I'm sure I wish you and my aunt every comfort in life."

"Yes, but I dare say, for all that, neither of you thought of drinking my health at dinner," observed Madame Claudine, with gentle reproachfulness. "Confess that that was not thought of."

"I grant the omission," replied M. de Moranges.

"I grant it too," added Olivier; "but I'm so ashamed of my neglect that I'll drink it now in anything you choose! More than that," said he, laughing, "I'll drink it in the glass of physic at your elbow;" and he

put out his hand towards a large glass standing on the table, close to the Sphinx's arm-chair, and filled with a pale red liquid.

She smiled.

"Oh, that punishment you might undergo," she remarked, cheerfully. "It's only my pomegranate syrup which Aspasia has just prepared for me—dear, thoughtful Aspasia!"

"Yes, we may well say that," murmured M. de Moranges.

"Here goes then for pomegranate syrup," cried Olivier, seizing the glass and emptying it at a draught. "To your health, happiness, and long life, my dear aunt."

As he replaced it, empty, upon the table, Mlle. Mourjon opened the door.

What her look said it would be impossible to describe, and she stood for one instant motionless and as though transfixed. It was, however, really only the affair of one instant; after which, she came forward into the room, with much of her usual air.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Night of that Day.

TWELVE o'clock had not long struck, and Claire was sitting in her own room, alone, listlessly letting the hours pass by, not knowing why she had not yet gone to bed, but already wrapt in the vague half-consciousness of a dream.

The night was one of those warm, cloudy, gusty nights towards the end of March, when puffs of smoke issue from the most unexceptionable of chimneys, and the silence is broken by sudden slaps against doors and windows, and by the fall to the earth of tiles or tree branches—a thoroughly uncomfortable night.

The apartment occupied by the young Marquise was on the first-floor, and had no window to the front. It was situated immediately under the nursery of her child, in which we have once seen Claire established during a slight illness of little Pierre's. The apartment consisted of three rooms, a spacious bed-chamber, a tolerably large saloon, and out of the latter a boudoir. All looked into the garden. Claire was seated in the boudoir, but the door into the saloon stood open, and the soft light shed by one lamp showed dimly the blue damask hangings of the larger room, and a beautifully arranged *jardinière* filled with ferns and pink cactus,

An inner staircase communicated with the saloon; and any one wishing to reach the boudoir must first come through the latter room.

Claire's seat was by the fire, on a low chair, right opposite to the door in question, which she had opened on account of the occasional whiffs of smoke that the wind forced from the chimney. How long she had sat there she scarcely knew, taking, as she did, but small note of time.

All was very still, except for the sounds that were now and then called forth by the wind's caprices. It was not the continuous wailing and moaning of the melancholy autumn wind, it was the unequal puffing and panting of young winds awakening beneath the touch of spring, and disporting themselves fitfully in their caves. Long lulls were suddenly broken by whirling blasts, and when they had done their mischief they subsided.

One heavy flap came against the boudoir window, accompanied by a wheezing creaking noise. It aroused Claire's attention. She rose, opened the window, and looked out. A branch of a very old acacia-tree had been wrenched almost entirely off from the trunk, and rested helpless against the wall of the house. The wind was apparently satisfied with its work, for it had again sunk down to rest, and all was still and silent. The night was an unquiet one, and the heavy masses of cloud tossed about restlessly over the calm depths of the firmament, now showing a patient star in the

distant heavens, and now letting a white ray of the moon struggle forth.

The night, as I said, was warm, and Claire was surprised at the mild breath that came to her cheek from such a troubled atmosphere. She closed the window, saddened instead of refreshed by the contact of the air, and once more took her place upon the low chair by the side of the fire. She lent forward, her two elbows resting on her knees, and her head supported by her hands, fixing an intently vacant gaze upon the fire.

It was not that she was a prey to despair, or to even active misery; she was purposeless in life, and she did not know how to fight against that. The torn branch of the acacia seemed to have fallen upon her heart, and to lie there with oh, such a heavy load; and in the vexed rollings of the drifting clouds she saw a kind of image of her own restless darkened years to come. But then, the pure light of the eternal star, far, far away, and patient, patient because eternal—that was her love. That was the resting-place, that the promise and the hope, and tears of mingled joy and sadness gathered in Claire's eyes. She traced home to its source the reason of her being there all alone, watching the fire and listening to the night, instead of sharing in the various revelries to which, at that very hour, she had been bidden.

At dinner at her mother's, some hours before, it had been stated that M. de Lancour was leaving for Algeria the next week. Was not that as she wished

it to be? Did not the very secret of her repose lie in his absence? could she be pained by any material severance? and what distance could divide hearts so eternally one?

And yet, in spite of herself, her woman's nature felt that when Victor's presence should have ceased in the place where she dwelt, there would fall a chill and a gloom upon that place. She did not need to see him. No! honestly, no! neither would he seek her—that she knew, and the knowledge pleased her. And yet—yet *what?*—she was on the verge of reasoning, of inquiring, and withdrew alarmed, throwing herself back into her dream.

Again a sound struck Claire's ear: it was not from without this time. It was as though there were footsteps on the inner stairs leading to her drawing-room. There was at the bottom of that staircase a cloth-covered door; it seemed to her that she heard the muffled flap of that door, as when suddenly opened and shut. But at this hour who should open or shut that door? who should want to mount that staircase leading only to her own private apartment?

The young Marquise had dismissed her maid at an early hour, and every one had now retired to rest in the hotel. From her side of the house nothing was heard of what passed in the court, and the *porte-cochère* might swing on its hinges, and carriages roll in and out, and the inmate of the rooms facing the garden be none the wiser.

She had been mistaken; it was only the wind.

And yet she seemed again to hear footsteps, and then the turning of the handle of a door. Claire was brave to excess—naturally brave,—but her mind was not just then attuned to facts: she was wrapt in her dreamy thoughts, or she would at once have risen and walked towards the noise; but her senses dreamt also, and what they perceived was perceived dreamily.

This time, however, there was reality in the sounds. The drawing-room door *had* opened, there *was* some one in that room; and, before this impression had become thoroughly clear to the watcher, a shadow fell obliquely upon the wall of the boudoir, and a figure stood in the doorway leading into the *salon*. It was that of a man.

Claire looked up at him—awed, not frightened, and did not for the first half second recognise who it was; then she rose, and went, speechless, up to the unsteady form, stretching out both her hands, and gazed in horror upon the livid face, before her parted lips could say,—

“Olivier!”

He took her hands in his. His were clammy and cold as death.

“Lock the doors,” said he, very low, but with a strange utterance, “and come back to me—quick.”

Claire did as she was bid, and when she had locked all the doors on the inside, came back to the boudoir.

Olivier had sunk down upon a sofa, and lay with his head resting on a cushion, and with his eyes

closed. His features were drawn and pinched, and dark blue and violet lines were visible round the nose and mouth and under the eyes. There was a dreadful awe round that head which made Claire sink, she knew not why, upon her knees and draw close to her husband.

"What has happened?" she said, in hushed tones: "why are you so cold?"

He opened his eyes slowly, and with an evident effort, answered, while his icy fingers pressed heavily upon her wrist,—

"Pay attention to my words, Claire, now—be quite quiet—I have strange things to tell you—be calm above all," and his fingers closed upon her arm. "I am poisoned, Claire!"

She uttered no word, neither did she start; for the words sank down like lead upon her senses, crushing her into silent rigidity.

"I have a great deal to say," continued M. de Beauvoisin; "more than I shall have time for; in the first place, mind, that, to-morrow, when the man comes to examine the body——"

But the numbness of Claire's faculties had passed away, and making a sudden movement as though to rise to her feet,—

"What madness it is," she exclaimed, "to be losing time in this way!—a doctor can be sent for instantly."

The weight of Olivier's hand held her down immovably.

"No one must be sent for," replied he; "but you must listen to me, Claire, and you must obey me, for I can waste no words. I know what has happened, but I shall not have time to tell you that—I shall be dead in less than an hour. Don't shrink so; be steadfast, and look it in the face; I do, Claire: and I assure you it's not at all what I fancied—my lower limbs are dead already, but I don't feel any fear—it's far less difficult to die than people think."

"Oh Olivier! my poor Olivier!" exclaimed Claire, bending down her head with an uncontrollable sob upon her husband's knee, for in the face of death there was about this dull inferior nature a solemn simplicity, a plain working-day sort of readiness to go when he was called, that touched her and made her quiver to the very centre of her being.

Olivier laid his hand tenderly on his wife's head, and, through the thick masses of her hair, the chill of those marble fingers reached her brain.

"The past is past, dear," said he, "but we must save all we can in the future. I see, as it seems to me, clearly, all the terrible mistakes that it is too late to think of now. I have nothing to forgive you, my wife, and you have forgiven me any harm I may ever have done. I sinned in ignorance, dear, for nothing was taught me that I should have been taught—but I count upon you for help. Don't cry, but listen. What the world must believe is, that I have died suddenly—heart complaint, aneurism—one man only is neces-

sary, one man only must be secured at no matter what cost. As soon as all is over call Leroux, and tell him to go for the doctor who lives over the way—he is the man who has to report deaths at the mairie—him you must see the moment he enters the house, and mind, Claire, whatever be the sum needed, you must give it to induce that man to report my death as natural—all the rest is easy.”

He gasped for breath, and leaned back.

Claire bowed her head and reverently kissed the hand that hung heavily over the arm of the sofa, but the cold swollen fingers seemed not to feel the caress.

It cost him a visible struggle to open his eyes, raise his head, and begin again to speak, and the glance of the eye was dim, and the speech was thicker than before.

“I have made no will,” said he; “but all goes to Pierre, and you will administer everything. Don’t let Pierre be brought up as I was,” he added, with a sudden effort of energy; “my mother has been my ruin; bring him up like a man—like all the world—like everybody—like his fellow creatures; send for Henri and Victor directly after you have secured the doctor; but secure him; if needful, trust both, trust Victor always—he is your cousin; consult them always; mind about Pierre——”

His head fell back, and Claire rose now and bent over him.

"Olivier, dear!" she whispered, "if it must be—if it is indeed inevitable, a priest should——"

"Raise my head," he murmured, and when she had done so with her arm,—*"Claire,"* he continued, more distinctly, and with a look she never more forgot, "not even a priest dare enter here. I believe in God with all my soul, and hope in his mercy; but that is in spite of those who taught me. Oh, there too, my wife, mind our child—take care; teach him to love God, and to know why he believes. Untie my cravat, dear," he added, with a kind of earnestness; "and take from my neck a ribbon—a little blue ribbon; there is a medal, a silver medal—there, you have it now."

Claire had followed the dying man's instructions, and held in her hand a medal on which was the image of the *Virgen del Pilar* of Seville. She knew it but too well; a Spanish lady had given it her at Biarritz when she was a child.

"My God! Olivier," she exclaimed, trembling from head to foot, and forgetting everything in her horror at what seemed this frightful coincidence, "is that woman the——? has she committed this crime?"

He stared at her for a moment vacantly, and then, with a strange smile.

"Poor thing," he muttered; "she!—oh no, poor girl! I understand it all clearly; but there's no time to tell; she was to have been the victim—she was," he reiterated, as though wanting to clutch tightly the sense of his words, "only I instead—I drank——"

Claire let her head droop upon her husband's

shoulder and hid her face. He seemed to be uneasily struggling against something that overpowered him.

"No inquiry, Claire," he muttered, "none. My mother must give all her money rather—all; tell Victor that—and Henri—shut it all up—hide it—no noise," and then, suddenly, he made a desperate effort to raise his head, and to force a look from under his heavy eyelids, as he said, "And Gaston!"

Claire could not divine his meaning, for there was an indescribable expression of terror in his glazing eye.

"Gaston," he repeated, "not him—burn—burn——"

Claire vainly sought for the purport of these words; but suddenly the aspect of the features changed, a smile passed over the lips, and in an almost inaudible whisper,—

"No matter," he said; "we were boys together—never mind Gaston."

And, as she watched, she felt the weight of the head that rested on her arm increase, and she knew that clay had returned to clay, the spirit having departed.

A corpse was there where a living man had been.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Before and After.—Conclusion.

It is not quite three years since M. de Beauvoisin died; it was in the spring of 1866, and the event would have created a stronger sensation than it did had it not been for the intense anxiety felt touching the war, which everyone knew to be impending, and which, in a certain stratum of society, absorbed men's minds and prevented them from attending, as they would otherwise have done, to the occurrences which happened at their own doors.

It was duly averred that Olivier had died suddenly from disease of the heart, and with that, both the world at large and the so-called intimate friends, rested satisfied.

When Claire found herself in the face of the dead, she wondered at the strange calm that came over her, and at the deep stillness rather than terror that the Dread Presence ushered in. She was not frightened, she was, as it were, hushed, and God himself seemed too near to her for that she should pray to Him. And so she sat, looking at what had, a few hours before, been a living man, with senses upon which so heavy a load was laid that they could not flutter, but were dulled into quietude. She tried to recall each word

her husband had spoken, and found that his every utterance was so stamped upon her brain, that the words rose up printed before her sight as though they must always be. She did not know whether she felt grieved or not, but when she looked at the little silver medal which, with its blue ribbon had fallen to the ground, and lay close to the chair whereon rested the corpse, she felt wondrous pitiful. When the first streak of daylight came the young Marquise got up from the seat whence she had not stirred for nearly five hours, and did precisely and mechanically what she had been told to do by him who could never more speak to her. She went to Olivier's apartment, rang the bell that communicated with the room where his valet slept, and telling Leroux that his master had had a fit, dispatched him for the "dead doctor,"* and told him, the instant that the latter came, to take a carriage and fetch Count Dupont without delay.

It was half-past six o'clock. The *Médecin des morts* arrived, and Claire spoke to him for five minutes alone. He was apparently satisfied by what she said to him, for he stated in his report that the Marquis de Beauvoisin had died that morning suddenly of an apoplexy of the heart.

Before he had taken his leave, Henri Dupont rushed in, full of genuine and profound sorrow for the death of the man who had leaned upon him through life.

* When any one dies in France, the "médecin des morts" must be sent for at once, and no burial can take place but upon his statement.

As soon as Henri was with her, Claire, in obedience to her husband's desire, summoned her cousin Victor who, living only three streets off, was at the Hôtel de Beauvoisin in less than half an hour.

No one thought it necessary as yet to apprise the Dowager.

The dead man was disrobed, and robed anew in the vestments of his eternal sleep by the two who, perhaps, alone cared aught for him in life, and, aided by his valet, they laid him on a couch in the boudoir where he had breathed his last. Claire gave them such womanly help as was needed, folded the cold hands over the breast, smoothed the hair upon the stone-cold brow, moving noiselessly about. All was done in silence, none spake ever a word.

Claire had picked up the ribbon and medal from the ground, and placed them upon a small table, on which, when the body was decently laid out, Henri Dupont proceeded to put by one by one, the different things that had been found upon the person of the deceased: his watch, and rings, and keys, &c. He saw the medal, recognised it, and involuntarily looked at Claire. She answered his look, and he then remembered having told her of this same silver medal.

"Shall I keep it?" she asked, in a low whisper; "or will you give it back?"

"I will think it over," he replied, in the same tone and with a disturbed air; "for the moment, keep it."

And he went on putting in order what he or Victor took from the dead man's clothes.

In the breast-pocket of the coat, M. de Lancour found a slip of paper, and unfolding it:

"A bill of exchange;" he observed, coming close to Henri Dupont, and in the first moment forgetting all technicalities, "is there anything that should be paid at once?" he added.

"Nay," said Henri, "it is paid, or he would not have it in his possession."

"More than that," rejoined Victor, "it is paid years ago."

"Years ago! what do you mean?" and Dupont glanced eagerly at the long narrow slip of paper, one end of which was now held by either man, and over which both bent their heads with fixed attention.

"Yes," continued Lancour, "look here: 'April, 1858'—eight years ago next month."

"Just so," murmured Dupont, turning lividly pale as one who is about to faint, "eight years now—1858—not of age—" and a shudder passed over his whole frame.

"It is for a large sum too," resumed Victor; "sixty thousand francs! and two full years before his majority—he was twenty-one in '60—but it is paid, what could induce him to carry it about with him, at this distance of time."

A groan escaped Dupont's tightly compressed lips, and he seized the back of a chair in the strong grip

of his right hand, letting his end of the paper escape. Victor turned it round in his fingers:

"Here is Gaston de Vivienne's name at the back," said he, with an altered accent, "yet it is not like his hand; the G. and the V. are like——"

But here he, too, stopped suddenly, and a paleness came over his features, and then he also let the paper drop, and it lay on the carpet at their feet, with the name——

Gaston Jean Ferdinand, Marquis de Vivienne,

staring at them from the soiled surface of the much crumpled paper.

The two men looked at each other, and knew what their common thought pointed to.

"How came it not to have been destroyed in all these years?" whispered Victor, and what Dupont answered was pronounced in an exceeding low tone, but low as it was, the name of "Gaston" fell upon Claire's ear. She turned round:

"He was eager at the very last," she said, "for something touching Gaston de Vivienne."

"What?" interrupted, hurriedly, Henri.

"He could not tell—he had not time," she replied, "but as he died he seemed to change his idea, for he told me I must not mind Gaston, for that they had been boys together, and that it was no matter."

Count Dupont passed his hand over his face uttering some indistinct expression of pain.

Meanwhile Victor was once more holding the slip

of paper in his hand and examining it minutely in every detail.

"It had best be destroyed now," he murmured; and, at an approving sign from Dupont, he went up to the fire-place, and, stooping down, put the bill of exchange into the fire. Both men watched until the last trace of the paper had been burnt away.

"Poor Olivier!" groaned Henri Dupont, as, for one second, he leaned both his elbows on the chimney-piece and covered his face with his hands.

"It is eight o'clock," remarked M. de Lancour, looking at his watch. "You ought, I think, to send to your mother-in-law." These words were addressed to the young Marquise.

"I will go to her, if you will allow me," said Count Dupont.

Claire accepted gratefully; and, in a few minutes, both Henri and Victor took their departure, leaving her to her silent watch over the dead, shared only with the curé of the parish, whom she had summoned the instant the *Médecin des morts* had left the house.

And now, whilst Henri Dupont goes to that hard, wilful mother with the tidings of her only son's death, we will, as briefly as possible, put the reader in possession of the facts which had taken place eight years before.

When Olivier de Beauvoisin, at nineteen, committed the folly of purchasing for Camille Leblond the set of emeralds and pearls for which she longed, he was

aware that the act was an imprudent one; but he did not regard it as anything beyond that. He knew he must one day be exceedingly rich—he had heard fabulous tales of the way in which men borrowed large sums, and paid for them when they succeeded to their fortunes, and he signed a promise to pay the sixty thousand francs to the jeweller in three months. Before the time was up, he had, naturally, to confess the whole transaction to Mardonnet, who, for a “consideration” of a very heavy description, undertook to obtain the money—and failed! That is, that thirty-six hours before the day of payment, he had to inform his youthful client that no money-lender he could influence would agree to advance the requisite sums to a minor unless the bill were endorsed by some man who had already attained his majority, and whose means were beyond doubt or dispute. Olivier’s one paramount dread was that of discovery on his mother’s part. This was, to a certain degree, shared in by Monsieur Théophile; for the character of the Dowager was so well known, that he thoroughly believed her capable of repudiating the debt and bringing an action against all or any parties who could be convicted of leading a minor into evil courses.

Discovery was, therefore, to both Olivier and Mardonnet, a contingency not to be looked at in the face. The money must be got—and the secret must be kept. These were the two necessities.

In one evening, spent with the young Marquis, Monsieur Théophile contrived to achieve his ends; for,

by dint of hearing story after story of what other men had done, Olivier grew familiar with the fatal project that was proposed to him, and (re-assured above all by the fatal notion that secrecy could be preserved) he committed a positively felonious act without any adequate idea of its enormity. The discovery would have seemed to him intolerable, but the fact itself was a matter of commercial transaction involving a simple, straightforward appreciation of plain right and wrong, of plain, working-day honesty, such as was adapted to the ways of life of inferior people, traders, men of business, &c., and had been neglected in the education of the Marquis de Beauvoisin. "Nobody on earth would ever know one word of it," declared Mardonnet; and, in two years, the debt would be paid without any one alive having been one bit the wiser. And so, in reality, it was. Things did fall out just as Monsieur Théophile had said; but punishment came all the same, only came much later.

When Olivier came of age, he satisfied all Mardonnet's claims—which were exorbitant—and he received in exchange all the papers and documents relating to the money transactions of his early youth. These said documents he burnt in Monsieur Théophile's study about six weeks after Monsieur Théophile had taken unto himself the lovely Camille as a wife, and had furnished for himself a home. Olivier never did recur to this event in thought, but, if he had done so, he would have told you he saw clearly before his eyes the whereabouts of the scene; the delivery of the papers

and the burning. And Olivier's conscience was quite at rest; he had never failed in honour; was all that a high-born gentleman should be, and ready to fight, no matter whom, upon the slightest provocation.

Yet, for all that, Nemesis was there; and however much M. de Beauvoisin might be living through life with the conviction that hidden wrong was powerless, and that hidden sin was dumb—or, in other words, that falsehood was as good as truth—the wrong was lying in wait, and the sin would find a tongue. All was not burnt, and what had happened was this:—

When Olivier handed over to Mardonnet the sums stipulated by the latter as necessary to enable him to refund what (in order to cover M. de Beauvoisin) he had been himself obliged to borrow, he received in return certain letters he had written to M. Théophile upon these subjects, and four different bills of exchange, three whereof were harmless enough, and upon one alone of which stood the forged signature. They were all pretty much alike; Olivier gathered them all up together in his hand, counted them, but laid them for an instant down again upon the table, whence he took a letter, a coach-maker's bill, and an envelope addressed to Mardonnet in his own handwriting; all these various papers he then consigned in a bundle to the flames, and took his leave of M. Théophile, lightened of the sole burthen he thought he should ever have to bear in life.

That same evening the lovely Camille, as was her wont, came in her husband's absence (Mardonnet mostly

passed his evenings at some minor theatre), prying into his drawers, and hunting, ferret-like, among his papers. She found, covered by a sheet of foolscap, under which it had slipped, the bill of exchange with Gaston de Vivienne's name upon it, the importance of which was well known to her. This she put into her pocket, and the next morning at breakfast showed it to her spouse.

Mardonnet, to do him justice, was for returning it at once to M. de Beauvoisin, "for," said he, with a lingering instinct of original honesty, "I'm paid."

"Nonsense!" retorted his wife; "it is Providence puts it in our hands; it may be of use some day, and one should never throw away a chance of keeping a hold over those grandees;" and so she kept it for six years, and only gave it out of her keeping when, on their return from their Moldo-Wallachian exile, her husband asked her for it, and she saw that a sort of ambition being aroused in him, he would be a safe guardian of the talisman.

The man would have restored the document to its rightful owner, the woman prevented him; the man, when once more in possession of it, would have made, after all, but a clumsy use of his treasure; but a woman again got it from him, and transformed it into a deadly weapon.

The wily Aspasia had not talked over his plans for half an hour with Théophile Mardonnet before she was convinced of the existence of a mystery, and deter-

mined that the clue thereto should be delivered over to her.

And so it was, as we know, and the fatal bill of exchange once possessed by Mlle. Mourjon, the rest was but an affair of time and of detail.

Olivier lived for some months in utter ignorance of what had occurred, and cradled in the persuasion that of the past there endured no palpable trace of any kind.

The sight of Mardonnet on the Easter Sunday when the latter accosted him in the street, was disagreeable to Olivier as recalling unpleasant memories, but these were vague, and pointed to no danger.

He did not like the electoral contest with Monsieur Théophile, because he felt the latter had it in his power to state ugly things concerning him; and he, who had committed the act of falsehood, was uncertain of the amount of assurance with which, if put to it, he should give forth the false utterance—the denial of the true fact. Mardonnet's presence was uncomfortable to him—nothing more.

But when, in the midst of the electoral struggle, he received Aspasia's letter (of the 6th July) his drowsy conscience re-awakened suddenly, and he knew that real danger threatened him. From the shock that he received when the fatal bill, bearing Gaston de Vivienne's signature, was shown to him, Olivier never entirely recovered. He was from that hour, degraded in his own eyes. So long as the trace was lost, the doing of the deed itself was effaced from the tablets of his

mind; the instant the trace re-appeared, the deed was, anew—it seemed to him as though he had done it but yesterday.

With all the rest the reader is acquainted.

When the death-angel's wing first touched Olivier's brow, he knew, by some preternatural revelation by whose hand he died, and felt that he took Claudine's place in dying. But what the purpose had been, what was to be achieved by the Sphinx's death, and by whom it was combined, or what interest Aspasia had in her demise?—these were things beyond his lights, and the more he thought during the short time left him on that terrible night the dimmer his faculties became, and, at last, there remained only the consciousness of a strong, stern necessity for concealment. He felt that any research into the dark event must inevitably stain the honour of the whole family, that guilt lay on all sides, and that, instead of being lifted, the veil must be drawn tighter than ever over all.

He died like a gentleman, meeting his end calmly, and, for one brief second before resigning life, fathoming the depths of error and misery into which his timid, narrow, would-be-practical, and wholly heartless trainers had betrayed him.

They had feared most for this poor soul the dangers love brings to youth, and so they had, to the utmost of their power, guarded him from the weakness of loving, and had saved him as they esteemed, because they had so fashioned his nature that it should be loveless. And now, how stood their account summed up

in the face of this corpse? What were the dead man's gains, reaped at the cost of a wizened heart? Null. No generous impulse would have led him to give aught of what he had or what he was to a woman nobly loved and worthy—from all such imprudence as that he had been secured—but, budding into youth, he had for one woman forfeited honour, and another woman cost him, in manhood's prime, his life—only he loved neither.

Was there any consolation in that?

When Count Dupont found himself in the presence of the Dowager he told her, bluntly, and without any preparation, that her son was dead. He could not explain to himself why, but he felt pitiless towards this mother; and before her startled senses could take in the horrible news—

“I believe,” said he, looking steadfastly at her, and weighing each word,—“I believe he did *not* die naturally; I believe he was poisoned.”

A hoarse guttural cry burst from the Dowager's lips, and throwing up her clasped hands over her head—

“Oh! the monster!” she shrieked out. “I will tear her limb from limb!”

“*Who?* Madame la Marquise?” asked, coldly, Henri Dupont; and even in this hour of desolation she could conceive the terror of the situation; and resting her tight-clenched hands on the top of her head, she stood glowering wildly at her visitor, whose hard, steady gaze never detached itself from her features.

After a pause of a second or two—

“Remember,” whispered Count Dupont, coming close to the Dowager, and laying his hand upon her arm,—“Remember that, were the crime proved a hundred times over, and were it only required that a finger should be raised, or a word spoken, to secure the punishment of the criminal, the finger must *not* be raised and the word must *not* be spoken; but there must be silence for evermore, and the guilty must go scathless, whoever they may be. Remember that well;” he added, pressing her arm in his hand, and speaking with solemnity. “Wail as you will, for the son you have lost: mourn over him, and refuse to be consoled; but seek no solace in revenge—for it is forbidden you. You must be silent.”

And so saying he left her, and then she sorrowed for her child.

The death of his nephew caused M. de Moranges to postpone his marriage for a few weeks; but at the end of that period the Sphinx became Marquise de Moranges; and a very short time after, people ceased to talk of or to wonder at the event. A fair, pale, handsome woman, richly dressed, drove about the Bois, in a well-appointed, emblazoned landau, and the answer given to those who enquired her name, was,—

“Oh! you know that is the *famous* Madame de Moranges: she is not *received*, but they say she behaves very properly.”

And that was precisely what, at the end of a year and a half, the Dowager began to remark. For a

whole twelvemonth after her son's death she shut herself up at Beauvoisin, seeing none, writing to none but in her hard way mourning for him whose death lay indirectly at her door. At the end of that time she crept out of her seclusion, and occupied herself with life's business as though she could still find interest in it.

She came again to Paris, conferred with lawyers and notaries, bought and sold, and bargained, and traded for the undeniable good of her grandchild's property; and was heard several times to opine that it was neither wise nor right to exclude so completely the new Marquise de Moranges from all communication with the family.

"She conducts herself perfectly," she would observe. "She is, after all, my brother's lawful wife; she will probably have no children, and little Pierre's interests ought to be taken into account. *He* might be sent to see her," she usually concluded with.

Mlle. Mourjon was many months before she got over the impression of what had happened. She lost her sleep for more than a year out of sheer watchfulness over herself; for her chief terror was lest she should, in a moment of weakness, avow the whole, and incur the penalty due to her crime. However, she ended by surmounting her nervous depression of spirits, and is now a rich woman, married to a building-contractor, who, mainly with her help, is making a very large fortune. She lives very retired, but is much esteemed by the people who frequent her, and thought a very remarkable woman.

As to Madame de Mottefort, she is welcomed everywhere; her husband has been appointed to a command in the neighbourhood of Paris; and hers is regarded by all genuine *dévots* as a beautiful case of repentance—a sort of recommendation, indeed, to go and sin in order that the sin may be thus retrieved.

And Claire?

The day following her husband's burial, she left the Hôtel de Beauvoisin, and, for two years and a half, lived with her little son in her father's house, neither paying nor receiving visits—shut up totally from all contact with the world, and living exclusively with her father and mother, and Aunt Clémentine.

One day this autumn I was lounging upon the asphalte of the Champs Elysées, when I overheard some persons before me talking of the marriage to be solemnized next day between some man, whom everybody knew, and a widow.

"It may succeed," said one lady; "she is such an icicle! But he will never forget the episode of his youth. That is what these romances mostly come to; a man runs away with another man's wife, and has all the love out before he's thirty, and then comes in reason, and he makes an end and marries."

"Well," replied another, "you see the love-matches don't answer somehow; for I've always heard her first marriage with M. de Beauvoisin was quite an affair of the heart, and it certainly did not turn out successfully."

"There may be some hope, then, that this second marriage, being an affair of convenience, may turn out

better," observed a young gentleman; "it re-unites all the Clavreuil and Lancour property. Victor does a good thing for himself."

"And she is very lovely," said an elderly man.

The lady who had first spoken smiled.

"I shouldn't think that mattered much," she remarked; "however, as you say, it may succeed."

And thus the world judged.

The next day I went to the church where, in the quietest and most private manner possible, the marriage was celebrated. As the new husband and wife left the sacristy together, I remarked them well, and thought I saw that upon the face of each which made me augur well of their future.

Claire was, as I was told, to leave that night for Algeria, whither she accompanied her husband—a sharer in his toils and dangers, in his joys and success—a true, brave soldier's wife.

A bright grave light shone in the eyes of either, an earnestness of purpose sat upon their brow, and as they went forth I thought I saw a promise of happiness that would not deceive; and as they passed me by, I murmured from my innermost heart:—

"God speed them! they have been in the thick of life's battle, and know that *that* fight never ends, but must be fought on always unto death."

THE END.

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